# THE FROZEN TRAIL

AUSTIN J. SMALL

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BY

AUSTIN J. SMALL

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## CHAPTER I

It was a terrific beginning to the most terrific day Cedar Falls had ever known. It started with a rush and a roar and it came without warning or announcement.

Until that day the Come Inside had existed as one of the quietest saloons on the whole two thousand miles of the Yukon. Its owner, Josh Henderson, preferred it that way. He was an amicable man. He could flatten out a rough-house quicker than any man east of the Boundary. He liked the quiet life; and, having a way and a gun with him, he generally got it. And since Cedar Falls boasted but that one saloon—and observing always that the klondike has established a municipal standard entirely its own—Cedar Falls might reasonably be said to be a very orderly community.

But on that day a lot of totally unexpected things happened; and they happened in such a way that Cedar Falls suffered a jolt in the solar plexus of its quietude from which it never quite recovered.

Work in the town had ceased abruptly a few minutes after midday, that being the precise moment when Devereaux, the mail runner, was sighted swinging his dogs round the curve of the northbound, heading up from Dawson with the mails. Cedar Falls dropped its jobs and adjourned to the Come Inside.

Jim Devereaux came and went. His staccato voice, faint but distinct on the frost-gauzed air, floated back down the up-trail to Forty Mile and Cudahy. "Ai-ya! Bleareye! Lopalong! Redface! Mush, you dum-coloured sons of sin. Ai! Tinribs! Prittygal! Bloodser! Hit it up! Hit it up! Ai!" The crick-crack of his whip sounded clear as pistol shots.

Cedar Falls drank to him and swapped the news across. Mail day was an eagerly talkative day in the Come Inside. All topics of all nations chased round the bar—there were sixty-seven souls and eleven flags in Cedar Falls. A Pole cursed the International below his breath; a loyal Gothamite offered to bet the cosmic, solar, and stellar systems against the White Sox taking head of the League; a Yorkshireman was prepared to stake all that *and* five real dollars on the chances of his county furnishing the winner of the Football Cup; a Swede observed pleasantly that a Swede had struck gold across in Labrador; a Southern Stater was derisively amused at the idea of Ford as President; an Italian rubbed his hands and twitted a Russian on his inability to unearth a Mussolini; and a thin-faced Cockney obeyed all the tribal laws of his kind by getting up a sweepstake on the Derby.

It was warm and cosy in the Come Inside. Two sheet-iron stoves, one at each end of the bar, roared away noisily to the crackling music of the hardwood inside their gaping maws. Odd groups drifted out and away to their jobs. Others sat on round the fires and criticised the efforts of a dance girl struggling to learn the intricacies of the latest ballroom craze from a beardless youngster newly arrived from the dance-mad South. An occasional burst of laughter ripped out of the steady hum of conversation as

the dance girl got herself fearfully tangled up in the absurd antics of the new dance. Bat Masterson, the Government man, reached over for his concertina.

And it was just about then that it happened.

The door suddenly burst open with a crash. Three massive, heavily booted feet had landed on it simultaneously from the outside. So violent was the impact that the catches were smashed and the door cannoned round against the inside wall with a crash that shook the whole saloon and made the pewters jump.

"Put 'em up!"

As though to the touch of a magic silencer, the bar emptied itself of sound. The hum of voices snapped off as completely as though a steel curtain had dropped.

There were seventeen heads in that barroom and each one slowly screwed round in the direction of the door. And the sight that met their eyes was at once a gibe and a challenge.

Framed in the doorway three heavily furred figures stood, huge and menacing. Thick beaver hats were pulled low over savage, unwholesome faces, ear-flaps down and tied under scrubby bearded chins. Frost particles glistened on their clothes. Their calm, unhurried breathing showed in the steamy breath-vapour rising slowly from their mouths. For half a minute they stood there, their eyes ranging the company with insolent deliberation.

They bossed the show and they were tremendously aware of the fact. They bossed it on the merits of three sullen-looking blue-black automatics cocked against their sides.

"Gentlemen, you may smoke," Bully Magain, leader and spokesman of his gang of roughs, grinned at his own pleasantry. " 'Low me to introduce to your notice two

friends of mine, highly cultured gentlemen of nature both: on my right, Mr. Coldwater Griff, a gent with the smile of a little child and the soul of a saint; on my left, Gentle Bill Haines, one of the old nobility and proud to serve you—if you move another inch, Bat Masterson, I'll plug an epitaph into your fool head—come right along in, boys, and give 'em a nice bow. They're tickled to death to see you."

Josh Henderson, an old campaigner through the old hold-up days, poked a pained face across the bar counter and begged his customers not to get rattled.

"Don't draw, gentlemen; don't draw!" he implored. "You know what sized swine these are. They'll let fly as soon as look at you. Lord knows what the Mounted are doing to allow such scum on the earth. There oughter be ten foot of wind between the ground and their boots. For the love of Mike, gentlemen, keep your tempers. All they want is drink—as much as they can carry, and they want it free. I'd like to have the shooting of the hull blame boiling."

Coldwater Griff raised his hat. "Thank you for those kind words, sir," he said. "If you care to open your mouth again to the same tune, I'll fix it for you so's it'll stay shut."

The three of them came slowly into the bar.

"Griff," said Magain with a wave of his gun, "take a stroll among the folk and lift their cannons. It pains me to see young masculine damsels like these parading around with a bulge on the hip. There ought to be a law passed about it."

The sixteen men in the company eyed each other savagely, helplessly. Their eyes burned red and hot.

They knew the Magain gang; knew the viciousness that was ninety per cent of their make-up. They knew, too, that any one of them would shoot with as little compunction as he would step on a beetle.

There was an electric prinkle running through the air. It was as though the whole atmosphere had suddenly become highly and unbearably charged with a blue-hot current.

Magain rapped on the table with his gun. "Gentlemen, I've an announcement to make," he said. All the jeering banter had gone out of his voice; he spoke in a bull-throated rumble that was directed against each and every one of them.

"Gentlemen, I'm the lord of creation!" he announced. "Did you know that? Well, I'm telling you. I'm the lord high Boss of the Universe and I'm coming round in a minute to pull all your noses. You ought to be proud of it. 'Tain't often I find time to call around on Cedar Falls, but when I do, I guess I do the honours proper. And in acknowledgment of same, Cedar Falls is going to lick my boots!"

For an hour the three bullies held unchallenged sway in the Come Inside. They forced the company to drink the healths of every known outlaw on the river; they broke open the kegs of tobacco and poured bottles of gin into them; they filled up the water-butt with blocks of Chinese matches. They rifled the till of every cent in it; they knocked beer-cans out of the hands of those who were just about to drink, and they threatened to shoot any man who didn't keep his can filled. They got hold of Josh Henderson and pitched him neck and crop over his own bar. If they turned on a tap to draw off a drink, they left it

turned on. They just let it run and run until the barrel was empty.

Magain swished his boots about in the vile mess that was slowly covering the floor.

"Before I hit the skyline you're all going to drink this stuff," he declared, kicking showers of it over the crowd. "You're all going down on your hands and knees to drink these floor-boards dry." He chuckled to himself. "That's a very novel notion, I must allow," he said. "A whole barroom on its hands and knees drinking my health off the floor-boards!"

Griff and Haines joined in his outburst of ribald laughter.

Half a dozen men were sitting back on the deal forms with faces white and set. Their hands were gripping on the seats till their knuckle tips shone white. Bat Masterson was white and quivering: his chest was rising and falling jerkily and he was breathing through lips that were well-nigh bloodless. Not once, but a dozen times Bully Magain's roving eyes rested for a second on his and each time the contempt and insolence in Magain's grew more intolerable.

Magain began to taunt them: he flailed them, covered them with contemptuous ridicule and abuse.

It was patent to any one that he was forcing a flare-up; he was goading it, pricking it, using every vicious means in his power to precipitate a riot, and only the roving circles of the gun muzzles held it in check.

Every now and then Haines nodded to Henderson. The bartender looked for a couple of seconds at the unwavering automatic that pointed in a dead line with his stomach, shrugged his shoulders, and filled up their mugs again.

Their particular concoction was about as vile a mixture as one could well imagine—rye whiskey and gin, mixed.

With each drink Magain grew more arrogant and more threatening. He scoffed and mocked them till Masterson's endurance flicked over the border-line. His toes had been slowly flexing for a spring, a spring that would take him from his chair, all-standing, sheer to the throat of the swaggering giant who held the gun. He certainly did spring, but even as he vaulted from his seat two pairs of hands shot out and pulled him back with a thud. There was a flash and a roar. Magain's bullet cut a neat furrow through the top of his hat. "For God's sake, don't start her up yet!" hissed Henderson in his ear. "You'll let blue hell loose if you tinker around with 'em now: wait till they're drunk—we can down 'em then with a rush."

The bully's voice impinged itself evenly on the din. "You'll notice I can *use* this li'l' feller. Next time you move without leave I'll put a bullet underneath that hat."

The whiskey fumes had begun to climb. "Hey! you babes and suckers," he flared up. "I'm Bully Magain, I am! I'm first cousin to a bull buffalo. I'm the toughest, roughest, cussedest cuss on the whole blamed line River! I'm the li'l' feller that keeps the Canadian Mounted on the jump! I eat bear meat raw! Hear that, you swabs? I take my meat warm off the bone. I'm a fighter, I am—and there's going to be a fight in this bar right now." He wheeled and glared at Masterson.

The Government man swayed up to his feet. His cheeks were grey white, save where two hectic spots burned scarlet on the high bones.

"I'll—I'll—fight—you, you bullying hound!" He uttered the words in a strangled gasp. His eyes were

flashing with a dull, flat light—like the glimmer that shines off a crucible of molten lead. "Put up your gun—I'll fight you!"

Magain reeled against the bar counter. "Hear that?" he roared. "Hear what the infant says? A fight, he says —and he don't know what a mouth-ful he's said. Now *I'll* tell one!" His voice rose to a bellowing roar or drunken frenzy. "I'll fight—I'll fight every living soul in this bar before the sun goes down; every living soul bar that gal there and she shall dance while we fight. I'll learn you half-suckled no-goods what it means to wear man clothes in a man country!"

His gun swept in erratic circles round the bar, holding off the human avalanche that itched and tingled to get at his hairy throat. The dance woman picked up her skirts and ran for the door, but Coldwater Griff caught her in his arms and flung her back.

"You'd best dance in here," he said, leering at her.

"Sure! make her dance!" yelled Magain.

Bill Haines caught her round the waist and thrust her up on the table. "Dance, you polecat, or I'll ram you face down in the water-butt," he growled.

Nell o' the Dance Halls was half fainting from fright, but she boldly pretended a gay amusement. She smiled with a wan, impish face down at Magain.

"Bully is my man—he eats bear meat raw!" she smirked.

Magain grinned fatuously and staggered over to her table. He leered up at her with a tipsy smile of approval on his bloated face.

"Dance, you pretty devil," he said.

Nell's dance lasted scarcely a second. It consisted of a

single coup, but it gave Cedar Falls the chance it was gasping for.

Quick as a flash Nell o' the Dance Halls kicked. Her small slim foot shot out and connected with a bony click on the bully's fingers. Magain's automatic went whizzing over against the wall, and fell clattering to the floor.

While it was still in midair, Masterson leapt. Bully turned a fraction of a second too late; he received the full impact of a suddenly released human thunderbolt which hurtled at him in a flying riot of flailing arms and smashing fists. Magain was caught on the hop. Three separate and distinct triphammers thudded against his jaw in as many seconds and then a sledge-head kicked up from nowhere and connected with his chin; at the same moment a battering-ram of a head crashed violently into his stomach. Bully Magain went spinning against a roof standard and collapsed in a heap. Weight for weight, Magain could have half-murdered the smaller man, but Masterson had leapt in on the flood tide of passion; his blood was racing, pelting through his veins; he had felt the weight of a heavy man on the end of his bare fists, had tasted the jolting concussion of bone against bone—and he wanted some more!

He spun round on the others and Coldwater's first bullet sizzed past his ear; his second one went clean through a barrel of whiskey and two more streams of alcohol began to spread across the floor.

Half a score of the miners had flung themselves flat on their faces directly they saw Masterson lash out at Magain. Down they went behind the gin barrels, behind the stoves, behind the forms, anywhere so long as it was out of the line of fire. Masterson's rush was only the touch match

to the powder. There was a roar coming, and when bullets are spitting around, the safest place is flat down.

One of them, prone on the floor, saw his chance. He swung a heavy foot round viciously, knocking Bill Haines's ankles away from under him. The bully came down with a body-shaking crash. A pine log whizzed across, the bar and Coldwater Griff's gun went flying out of his grasp.

Immediately the uproar in the bar rose to a deafening crescendo. Passion blazed up in a thunderous din that swelled and swelled until clamorous demands for blood boomed through the tumult. The hot yells for vengeance drowned out the plaintive efforts of Josh Henderson, hopping about behind his bar, half-crazy with the wrecking of his saloon. The Magain gang was down. Here was a chance to flay the hides off the arrogant brutes; here was a chance to make them wish they'd never got to within a thousand miles of the Come Inside—the chance of a lifetime to teach them to steer clear of Cedar Falls for as long as the breath stayed in their bodies. There was a maddened scrambling of lusty bodies over rackety chairs and creaking tables, and Josh Henderson redoubled his loudly yelled: "No gun-play, gentlemen; no gun-play, I implore you!"

Just when it looked like three lynching jobs, a very small thing happened in the doorway. It was just such a little thing as could happen a thousand times a day in a saloon down in the South without attracting the slightest attention, but up there where the Little Cedar River joins the Yukon its effect was unique.

A girl came and stood in the doorway. That was all; nothing more than that. But considering the amazing calm that suddenly fell in the bar she might well have

been a whole regiment of the Royal Mounted. Men who, but a minute before, had been blazing with passion, governed only by a frantic desire to wreak a swift and savage vengeance on the brute creatures who, for over an hour, had held them up to ridicule and insult, began to look absurdly confused and uncomfortable.

But what a girl she was! It was inconceivable and unbelievable that such a dainty, charming creature could have existed in such a frost-throttled centre as Cedar Falls; it seemed to be against all the laws of nature that such a sweet and wholly feminine picture of loveliness could have lived in such an essentially masculine atmosphere as Little Cedar River. It was as though a weed-choked litter of brake and bracken had suddenly yielded up a wonderfully developed flower of choicest nurtured perfection.

Her eyes were bright as star flowers and there was the warm pink glow of perfect health on her cheeks. She was lissom and dark, and her slender figure showed bewitchingly through the cut of her outdoor dress. She wore a trim little leather tunic, edged-off with beads in the Indian fashion; her skirt was of dark blue cloth and she wore Indian fur shoes, also picked out in brightly coloured bead designs. She was dark-haired and dark-eyed. Dainty little kiss-curls peeped shyly from beneath a neat Quakerish little hat that seemed to cuddle her head. Her eyebrows were thin brown pencillings above glorious lustrous eyes, and such lips as hers were never made merely to be looked at.

And yet it was not any single one of those things that made her lovely, no single daintiness of manner or charm made her adorable, desirable in the eyes of men. It was

just the whole complete picture, the glorious hothouse flower blooming divinely and wondrously in the litter of weeds.

She paused for a moment by the broken door and then came right on into the saloon.

"What on earth is the matter in here, Mr. Henderson?" she asked.

Coldwater Griff stared at her in dumb amazement.

"Who the blazin' banshee might you be?" he demanded. "Who in the thunder . . ."

He stopped. He stopped for two totally distinct and dissimilar reasons. One was that he hadn't got another word to say for himself; the other was that any man of Coldwater Griff's type stops automatically when he feels the unmistakable press of a revolver against his liver. Coldwater Griff experienced both those contretemps. He also heard Masterson's hate-filled voice whisper in his ear: "Think out each sentence before you say it, you rat! One word from you that ain't to be found in a pocket dictionary and you weigh heavier by a drachm over the ounce!"

The girl gazed around at the broken funiture, the smashed barrels, the spread-eagle form of Bully Magain over by the standard.

"Mr. Henderson, won't you please tell me what all the noise was about?" she repeated. "Bless my soul, it sounded worse than a double-team dog-fight, and I'm positive I heard some one shooting."

Josh Henderson cleared his throat. "It's like this, Miss Royal," he said. "These three lumps of river junk blew in here offerin' to demonstrate some new wrastlin' holds they'd learned back at Forty Mile. The boys got a bit fresh; that's all there was. There was a bit of a rumpus

and maybe a couple of whiskey bottles went off bust; but I wouldn't like you to think there had been any gun-play, not in *my* saloon, Miss." He ended on a note of pained surprise that Miss Royal should ever have dreamed such a thing.

The girl regarded the motley gathering without the slightest embarrassment. "Then what is Mr. Masterson doing with a gun in his hand?" she asked.

"Me? A gun?" said Masterson in surprise. He looked at it as though completely amazed at its presence in his hand. "Say, this isn't my gun, Miss; it belongs to this swab—er—this guy here. They were all wrastling around together and I was sort of scared it might go off." The Government man swallowed hard.

"Give it to me!" she said. "You're worse than a crowd of heathen." She walked round the saloon and collected every gun she could find. Josh Henderson took them and dumped them in a drawer behind the bar.

"You can let them have them back when they've finished wrestling," she said.

Henderson passed the back of his hand across his mouth and he grinned sheepishly. He couldn't help himself; her mouth was as full of wicked, half-formed smiles as were her eyes.

Magain slowly stirred to life on the floor. He sat up and rubbed his swollen jaws. The whiskey fumes were burning in his head and he was in a fearful temper. He scrambled unsteadily to his feet and stood swaying against the wall. Suddenly he caught sight of Masterson. He stared at him for a moment as though trying to pin his groping mind down to certain realities connected with that particular individual. Then, without the slightest warn-

ing, he walked across the bar and, with one terrific blow on the head, knocked him reeling out through the door.

That time not even the presence of June Royal could prevent the riot that went thundering and crashing across the floor of the Come Inside. Josh Henderson reached over two great, hairy arms and pulled her bodily over the counter into the comparative safety of the serving-bay.

The only difference in *that* fight was that Josh Henderson, being sole lessee and manager of every gun in the place, had no need to dance up and down behind his counter, shouting: "No gun-play, gentlemen; no gun-play, I implore you!"

Instead, he had the complete satisfaction of seeing the miners rear up *en masse* and proceed about the business of knocking the breakfast out of the Magain gang.

"Into it, boys, pitch into 'em," he yelled. "Go on! They like it—they eat bear meat raw.

"They like blood-meat straight from the bone. Larrup 'em! Knock the faces off 'em! Souse 'em in that liquor they was goin' to make us lap up."

But it was early evident that the Magain gang, although outnumbered four to one, was not going to down without a fight. All three of them were tremendously powerful men, heavy-thewed, deep in the chest, and were, all told, about as unprincipled a set of ruffians as one could find anywhere on the not too fastidious Klondike. All three were fighting drunk and they were possessed of all the terrific strength and ferocious energy that is the fighting gift of alcohol. It was an amazing fight. One minute they were all down on the bar floor, rolling over one another like a crowd of rabid dogs, the next they were all swaying up on

their legs again, fighting, clawing, snarling, punching and hitting like madmen.

Henderson's bar was a sorry sight. In ten minutes it was a wreck. Masterson was out of the fight altogether. His mind was still groping blindly throught the white fogs of a complete knock-out. He could not even hear the sounds of smashing bottles or the fierce oaths of the combatants as they struggled and swayed and fought across the floor.

Cedar Falls' terrific day had made a very promising start, but it was only a preliminary to what was still in the air.

Josh Henderson looked out of the door to see what had become of Masterson. The Government man, on his hands and knees, was just beginning to get a grip on his surroundings. But it was not on him that the barkeeper's puzzled eyes were fixed. He was staring right on beyond Masterson, on past the little tin Mission and the other cabins and houses, to where the trail, in a grey hair-line, crawled down over the Bluffs.

Two men were coming down that trail. They were trying to walk upright, trying to keep their feet in the trail. But their legs were acting queer. They were half-running, reeling, stumbling, staggering, tottering.

For the third time that afternoon an unconscious, involuntary hush spread through the bar. The mad scrambling and shouting ceased; the fighting and the bitterness oozed away. The whole crowd, with heads thrust forward and eyes wide open, stared out through the door. For a tense, breathless minute an absolute silence reigned in the saloon. Then a strained voice whispered: "Boys, those two guys are all in!"

Through the doorway of the Come Inside a wide stretch of snow-choked country streamed out to the view. Coppices of spruce and fir and pine towered above little clumps of stunted cedar all the way down to the wide-sweeping valley of the Yukon. Dotted among them were square, log-built cabins and a few single-storey timber houses of three and four rooms with faint spirals of blue wood-smoke curling up from them. Trees and ridges and cabins and houses lay inert under great fat loads of glittering snow. The main up-trail from Dawson to Forty Mile sidled past the cabins and continued right on to the foot of the great yellow Bluffs which, stepping northward tier on tier in ever-increasing mightiness, ultimately became the Harper Mountains.

Into that trail staggered the two humans. They were hanging on to each other, utterly dependent on the mutual support of the mutually exhausted. Their feet were dragging; bits of broken snowshoe trailed behind them on the gut thongs. Time after time they went sprawling on their faces, to lie flat for a while, before staggering up and stumbling onward. The trail they cut out was a helpless zigzag, as erratic as it was pathetic. A drunken man might have cut a straighter one. Although every step must have been an agony, they came on: they came on from sheer strength or will power alone, for it was obvious to even the beardless greenhorn that both of them were standing right out at the frayed-up edges of utter exhaustion.

The men in the Come Inside stood dumfounded. They just stood and stared, and mentally wondered what sort of terrific climax those two men were running to earth out there in the snow. No one moved out to help them for a reason that became obvious—one of the strangers

carried a wicked-looking gun which he flourished menacingly at a ring of invisible foes. With spasmodic spurts and falls they stumbled on. A hundred yards from the saloon their faces became distinguishable: a white man and an Indian. It was the Indian who flourished the gun.

The white man was far gone. His eyes were closed; it was plain that he was moving mechanically. His limbs were working to no command of his; his brain had ceased to function. The bone-hard stamp of starvation and high fever stood out lividly on their faces. They looked like skin-covered skeletons. Only the Indian retained some semblance of consciousness. His eyes were fixed dully, but with a glare of indomitable purpose, on the doorway of the Come Inside. He was gripping the white man savagely under the arm, urging him forward, his own frame showing stark and bony through his loose-hanging clothes. On they came, two helpless bits of flotsam flung up from the outer deeps of the snow seas, reeling and staggering like drunken men—drunk with the brutal delirium of long vicious days adrift in the wilderness of snow and the white, foodless trails.

At the doorstep of the Come Inside the Indian came to a swaying standstill. He gazed uncomprehendingly around at the circle of staring faces. Then he gathered up the last dregs of his strength and pushed the white man in. The limp body staggered for a step or two and fell with a headlong crash on the whiskey-soaked floor of the bar . . . He stayed where he fell, on the flat of his back, with arms outstretched and blind eyes upturned to the log ceiling, down and out to the world.

"My God, that's Endersley, Bob Endersley!" whispered a throaty voice.

The Indian stood against the doorpost waving his gun threateningly. He was unable to speak; his jaws were useless from frostbite, but his blazing eyes were yelling aloud the message his mouth was powerless to convey. Only a man who had been starved and hammered on fierce, unbroken trails could have been reduced to the state of helpless stupefaction the Indian was in. The crowd knew it. They knew, too, that only a stubborn, tremendous determination could have brought him through.

Endersley lay like a log where he had fallen, absolutely incapable of movement. The Indian waved his gun, sombrely, menacingly, at the group, while his eyes burned and blazoned his message into their souls. "Look after him! Look after him and bring him round—or, by the living God, I'll finish the whole bunch of you!" He propped himself against the doorpost and pointed toward the unconscious man on the floor.

Suddenly Henderson blurted: "For the love of Mike, boys, look at his fists! Good Lord!—just look at his fists!"

A gasp and a long intake of breath rustled round the bar. Bodies bent automatically as they crowded round the fallen man; those at the back pressed forward, craning their necks to see what it was that sent a thrill like a shock of electricity streaking through the whole saloon. They, too, gasped when they saw what was in the fallen man's hands. For Robert Endersley's frostbitten fists were chockful of raw flaming gold—real, primal nugget stuff that glittered and tittered at them in a hundred dancing points of yellow fire. The men who saw it stood rigid as statues; staring with feverish eyes at the fistfuls of gold; for the knowledge was roaring across their brains

that where that stuff came from there was more—heaps and heaps more!

For a full half-minute a silence reigned, so tense, so strained that it hurt. Then the wells of excitement gushed open. Bedlam broke out. Gold had come to Cedar Falls. None of your little tiny flecks, wrested from the earth by weary months of pan-washing down at the frozen creeks, but gold in lumps, gold in great fat virgin lumps that thundered aloud their own thrilling story of more where it came from! Here was a man fresh in from the silent brooding whiteness of the great Outback, with his fists full of it; a man, speechless with the rigours of his fight for it, staggering in to Cedar Falls with the news red-hot from the anvil, a dumb man who told the most wonderful story of all. Tongues babbled excitedly of a new Bonanza, an unknown Eldorado perched somewhere out there behind the mammoth heights of the Harper Mountains; a new and wonderful gold field that would make millionaires of them all.

June Royal tiptoed across behind the bar and unlocked the drawer where Henderson had dumped the guns. She picked out a businesslike-looking one with a double magazine and a hair-cock.

She was just in time. Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff were down on their knees beside the unconscious man, savagely tearing his furs. Bill Haines had gone lurching off to find the Indian. He stopped dead in the doorway, stopped as though shot. The Indian had vanished! Haines looked in bewilderment up and down the trail. It was empty.

That was a most amazing thing, for there was nowhere where the Indian could have got to in that short space

of time; there was no cover anywhere within two hundred yards, and, considering the state the Indian was in, he could not possibly have made it. Yet the trail was empty; there was neither sight nor trace of him.

He darted back into the bar. "Bully, that Siwash son of a gun has slipped us," he exclaimed. "He's got away somehow—th'aint a trace of him nowhere. He's melted!"

Magain grunted. "Don't matter a damn," he growled. "This guy here has got all we want. He's bound to have a paper of some sort on him. Bound to. Men don't go walking around finding ace-high locations without figuring out their claim papers. He's got it somewhere. Inside his . . ."

"Stand away from that man!" An angry, indignant voice snapped the words out behind him.

Bully Magain stopped searching long enough to turn and see who it was who had the temerity to hand *him* an order. A look of half-amused surprise came over his face when he saw June Royal standing over him. Then he saw the gun. He backed away hurriedly.

"Look out!" he gasped. "For the love of mud, take your finger off that trigger—it's a hair release!"

"I know it is!" she retorted defiantly. "And if it *does* go off, it will be pointing at you! Make no mistake about that! I think the three of you had better clear out before my finger twitches."

She followed them to the door, all three of them cursing and swearing frightfully below their breaths and looking as though they would like to murder her. The gun with the hair-spring covered them from the doorway all the way up the trail to the Bluffs. Only once they looked back—and the finger twitched, the hair-spring slipped its pawl.

A gout of snow-powder spurted up two yards behind them.

The men who ate bear meat raw turned and ran.

The news of a new and wonderful gold deposit swept through Cedar Falls like a prairie fire. Every inhabitant of the place crowded into the barroom of the Come Inside. One of the first to arrive was Pierre Bonard, the Baptist minister, who toiled out his days with a splendid sincerity of purpose in the little Mission under the Bluffs. It was typical of the man that the first question he asked in the Come Inside did not concern news of the fabulous gold mine, but the health of the poor soul who had found it. The atmosphere cleared a little with his advent. With his grey-white hair and dignified mien, he commanded just that little touch of respect and restraint from the frenzied miners that was badly needed in so difficult a situation.

It *was* a difficult situation, for every man in Cedar Falls had gone rocketing off his balance when the gold fever set in.

That gold fever is a fierce thing. It pulls out the very worst in the human character; it magnifies a hundredfold all the selfishness, greed, and brutality that exists in human nature. As things were shaping just then, anything was likely to happen. The men who lived in the North are sons of a sturdy breed, but even they only hang on in those harsh parallels because they hope and believe their turn will come. On that hope they live. The Fairy with the Voice of Gold is likely to whisper at any hour of the day or night; her songs are fortunes, her voice is wealth; so they stay on, hoping eternally that they may be on hand when next the Fairy whispers.

And here they were right bang on hand—and for all the good it had done them they might as well be a thousand

miles away. Of the two people in the whole of the universe who knew the secret of the terrific find, one had vanished and the other was unconscious. It was maddening.

They hunted for the Indian high and low, but he had disappeared as completely as though the trail had opened and swallowed him up. And there was neither paper nor clue of any sort to be found on Endersley; only the maddening knowledge of the gold mine's existence and the still more maddening sight of the yellow chunks Endersley had managed to bring through.

And what was far worse, Robert Endersley was likely to remain unconscious for weeks. He was snow-blind, he was beaten flat with exhaustion and the snow-fever had got its tentacles on him. They did not need to be told how long it would be before Endersley would be able to get a grip on his outraged faculties. They were men of the North, suckled on such knowledge, and they knew that, even if he lived, Endersley would have to be kept in unbroken quietness for at least four weeks if he was ever to talk lucidly again.

Small wonder that the polyglot population of Cedar Falls took the bit between its teeth when they saw the lumps of gold being prized out of Endersley's frozen hands. They saw it in all its pristine wonder and their talk flew off the handle. Loud, excited voices declared that Endersley had slammed his pegs down on the biggest deposit since Cormack set the whole Klondike ablaze with his Bonanza Creek strike in '96. Hotly gesticulating miners talked wildly of dwarfing all other great strikes in Yukon history—Bonanza, Copper Creek, Klondike River, Nome, New Eldorado, Ogilvie, Stewart Mountain, Dawson, Circle,

Bonaventure—none of these had ever yielded nuggets of such size and purity as Endersley had found.

The whole crowd of them were straining at the leash, all boiling over with a mad anxiety to get up to Endersley's new location and thump their own pegs down. All that was wanted was a clue, a clue as to its whereabouts, and there wasn't one. It was a blistering situation.

The only man in all Cedar Falls who was not waiting on the tiptoe of suppressed excitement for the hint that would send them all stampeding away, up past the Harper Mountains, was Pierre Bonard. He continued his calm, unruffled way, working toward the salvation of Endersley. He helped June Royal to get the gold lumps away from his clutching fingers. Endersley had clung to them with such desperate tenacity during his last frantic days on trail that his palms were all bruised and calloused. The minister looked up at the girl from the unconscious bundle of skin and bone on the barroom table, and pursed his lips. "My child, he needs a nurse," he said quietly.

For a brief second their eyes met, frankly, seriously.

"Henderson is getting me some hot milk," she said. "As soon as he has had that, they are taking him over to my cabin."

The minister bowed his head. "You may take him to the Mission house if you wish, but I think you are wisest in that matter." He put his hand on her shoulder. "You know what you are taking on your hands, don't you? It will be a long difficult task: a weary, painful task," he said earnestly.

June Royal lowered her eyes. "I know Pierre," she said. "Please do not disturb yourself. I want to do it."

Thereafter, for a month, she and Pierre Bonard fought

for the wanderer's life. Theirs was a great fight. They speak of it yet in Cedar Falls. For twenty-six days Endersley lay like one from whom life had fled. Smothered under a great mound of blankets, with his eyes heavily bandaged and with three red-hot stoves roaring away in the cabin together, he lay and gasped for life while the priest and the girl worked and toiled on his numbed body. And as he lay, with the frost devils rampaging about in his brain, he babbled. He babbled of the long killing months he had spent on trail; of the endless setbacks that had dogged him all the way down from the top-trails; of the dogs that had died off one by one; of the sled full of food that had been overwhelmed in a snowslide; of their only rifle and the way it had gone clattering down a crevasse in the Harper Mountains; of the unbelievable sequences of bad luck that had assailed them ever since they started down from the North; and of a terrific new gold strike he had made right up there where the sundogs dance in the noonday sky. It wasn't so much a gold mine as a gold mountain—a great stark hill so full and brimming over with nuggets that they stuck out over it like currants in a pie, like cobblestones in a stable yard. It was bursting with gold, a miracle deposit that had to be seen to be believed. Fortune stuck out of the ground at every stride; it was nothing more nor less than the solid realization of every prospector's fairy dreams—a tremendous collection of gold pockets.

But those who waited tense-eared round the shack, listening to the unconscious man's ravings, waited in vain for the clue as to its location. One hint and one only he dropped during the days he stood shouting in the forecourt of Death. And that was the name of his Indian was

Sitka Charley. Through all the running babble of his talk ran a golden thread of praise for Sitka Charley. Without his doglike devotion he could never have got through. Without him nothing would have happened—except a bag of bones up there where the sundogs dance. He talked for hours of his amazing endurance, his unswerving faithfulness, and his extraordinary contempt for hunger when starvation was staring deep into their eyes.

But that was all. No more than that. There was never a word for the straining ears and the itching feet.

All through the long bitter nights, while the last vicious gales of winter whined and streamed across the country, June Royal and Pierre Bonard sat up with him, nursing, comforting, soothing, tending, while he stood yelling into the open grave, raving of gold in hundredweight slabs. Those three between them fought out a terrific battle, a wearying, exhausting battle.

When the zero gods and the iron brutalities of the snow wastes have flogged and beaten and pulverized a man into a state of absolute vacuity, only treatment of the tenderest yet severest nature can bring him back from the shadows. Robert Endersley was black and blue and stiff and sore by the time June Royal and Bonard eased up their efforts.

There were a thousand reasons why Robert Endersley should have died. His powers of resistance and his ability to fight back had been reduced to a frayed shred; he was emaciated to the semblance of a sleeping mummy; he was fast in the grip of snow madness; he was frostbitten all over; his eyes had been burned blind by the snow-glare, and there was ice in his lungs. All the laws of the North and all the rules of precedent ordained that he should die.

By every limit that governs the power of human endurance, he should have died.

There were two reasons why Robert Endersley should have lived. One was June Royal, the other was Pierre Bonard. Slowly, with efforts untiring, untirable, they dragged him back from the forecourt, back up the long climb from coma, high fevers, and abrupt relapses. By sheer will strength and dogged persistence they set him four-square on the highroad to a life renewed.

They knew that he had breasted the hill when on the day his ravings ceased and he slept instead of lying torpid.

On that day Pierre Bonard ceased smoking. The first essential to the combating of snow-fever is that every taint and taste and smell of snow shall be obliterated from the patient's senses. Knowing that, Pierre Bonard sat and smoked; he smoked till he filled the cabin with blue pipe fumes; till the cabin and everything in it swam in a smoke haze; smoked till his tongue became so raw that he could no longer utter the words of his services in the little Mission under the Bluffs. But he and his smoke fumes won.

All through those painful days, while spring came mincing across the wilderness, prospectors and miners went quartering up and down river trying to get on the Indian's trail. Others picked up Endersley's original trail and tried to work it back to its logical conclusion, but that effort developed into a mad race between the prospectors and the spring thaw. And the thaw won; they backtrailed him as far as Five Fingers, and there the trail ended, slowly petered out in a rainstorm that slashed and drove across the land ceaselessly through the night.

Endersley's eyes were still heavily bandaged the day

he drifted up from the depths and called weakly for Sitka Charley. Pierre Bonard was alone in the cabin with him. Gently, and with infinite tenderness, he quieted his querulous questionings. In a low, soothing voice he told him that Sitka Charley would come presently. He told him of his long illness and of how near he had been to death. For over an hour he talked, breaking the news gently to him. Last of all he told him that he was snow-blind, but that later on, when the darkness had had time to heal the ravaged eyes, he would probably see again.

"You have been very near to the Valley of Shadows, my son, very near," he said, "and now I want you to lie quietly and go to sleep. Rest and quiet will help you more than anything else. You know, you are still very weak, much too weak to worry yourself."

Endersley lay quiet for a long time. Then he said in a faint, troubled voice: "Pierre, would you mind telling me again everything that you know about me—right from the day you first saw me?"

Pierre reiterated the story of what had taken place since Endersley and the Indian came stumbling into Cedar Falls.

"And you say I found a gold mine?" asked Endersley in a puzzled voice.

"You brought back handfuls of nuggets with you, my friend. They are locked in the safe custody of the Mounted in the police post."

Endersley's face was drawn and white under the bandages. There were tense, strained lines about the mouth that told of an intense mental struggle going on in Endersley's mind.

Pierre did not like it. He patted him gently on the

shoulder. "My friend, you must not tax your brain," he said. "You have had a bad bout with the snow-fever and you must rest; you must not even try to think."

Endersley relaxed utterly on the bunk. "Pierre, Pierre!" he cried, "that is just my trouble. *I cannot think!* I cannot remember!"

"My son, my son, you must not say such things; you must not *think* such things."

"But I can't think, Pierre." There was anguish in Endersley's voice. "All the time you have been talking I have been trying to think back to the beginning. I can't! I can't! The last year of my life has gone! It is all a blank. I can remember right up to when we started out on the long trip over the mountains. I can remember Sitka Charley and the plans we made. I can remember that we broke them all in the first week and then the blank comes; my whole life since the spring of last year has gone. I have lost it! Oh, Pierre, fetch Sitka Charley to me!"

Pierre Bonard looked helplessly at the stricken man. How could he tell him that all Cedar Falls had been hunting and searching for his Indian?—that the whole organization of the Canadian Mounted had been pressed in to the task of finding Sitka Charley and that they all had failed? How could he tell him that the chances were a thousand to one that his Indian was dead; that he had collapsed in the snow and died after pushing his partner into the haven of the Come Inside?

That afternoon Sergeant Norvice, of the Canadian Mounted, took certain matters into his own hands. Outside the Government House stood a square black notice board, whereon the Government posted its endless Warnings, Proclamations, and Notices. Cedar Falls gathered round and

read, with quickening interest, the new one that appeared thereon. In block charcoal letters it announced:

NOTICE! $500 REWARD!!

WILL BE PAID TO ANY ONE GIVING INFORMATION THAT WILL LEAD TO THE TRACING OF THE INDIAN TRAPPER, SITKA CHARLEY. KNOWLEDGE OF HIS WHEREABOUTS IS URGENTLY DESIRED BY THE AUTHORITIES. WAS LAST SEEN HEADING UP TOWARD FORTY MILE WITHOUT FOOD OR DOGS. HE IS PROBABLY DEAD. IF SO, HIS BODY AND **ALL BELONGINGS** MUST BE BROUGHT TO HEADQUARTERS **INTACT.** OTHERWISE THIS REWARD IS WITHDRAWN.

(*Signed*) SERGT. RALPH NORVICE
*Royal Canadian Mounted Police*

Josh Henderson read the proclamation and tittered. Masterson, standing at his elbow, read it through twice and shrugged his shoulders.

"Explains a lot, don't it?" he muttered.

"It does so," assented Henderson grimly. "Reckon old Pierre must be gettin' worried about suthin'."

"Say, do you believe that bit about Charley?"

"What bit?"

"That bit about him being dead."

"I'm darn sure he ain't!" said Henderson emphatically. "No, sir. Sarn't Ralph has skidded right off the narrow path when he says that. If he really thinks Charley has stiffened out, all I can say is, Norvice don't know two cents about that Indian. Believe me, he's just the dadblamedest toughest old devil that ever laid his traps in the North. I know him! I did a season with him once, over in the Porcupine country. Gee! He paced me to a standstill. The cold snap that would put Charley's fires out hasn't happened

yet. He thrives on zero. I believe Charley would be heard lamenting the unnat'ral heat if hell froze over. He's a peripatetic hideful of old nails, whipcord and gristle, held together by big lumps of disinclination to talk, that's what he is. And they think he's dead? Say, don't make me laugh! That Indian is lying doggo. He's waiting for his boss to mend."

Masterson looked at the notice again and frowned. "Can't understand Norvice doing a fool thing like that," he muttered. "Norvice isn't a bonehead! He keeps his living well under his hat generally, but . . ."

"You're right, Bat. Norvice is a mighty good man, especially when it comes down to knuckle-dusters and rough-stuff, but he certainly seems to have missed his cue there. What does he want that Indian for? Does he think he can make him talk? Huh? I'll tell the world that even if he does find him, not all the Mounted Sergeants in the Territories would be able to make him talk, not if they was to ram hot coals down his neck. Terrible uncommunicative devil is Charley, when he takes a leaning toward silence."

Masterson nodded. "True enough," he admitted. "There's only one man in the world could make Charley waggle his tongue—and his name ain't Norvice: no, sir, not by a pailful!"

The news that a reward was out for Charley went through the camp in half a minute. One or two of the miners, who had begun to put Endersley's ravings down to the helpless outpourings of a harassed brain, repacked their stampeding kits. They hung them handy on the nail behind the door and waited for things to happen.

For Sitka Charley was a known character along the Canadian end of the Yukon. They knew him for one of the

keenest, toughest hunters west of the Rockies, and they gave him credit for possessing a keener, shrewder brain than many white men. To them, Charley's silence proved beyond all doubt that Endersley really had got his pegs into a devilish big proposition somewhere up there beyond Five Fingers. It also proved the futility of posting up notices to find his dead body. The longer Masterson looked at that notice, the more it tickled him.

"Norvice might as well advertise for vacant possession of the moon as dangle five hundred dollars under Charley's nose!" he declared.

He felt a bone-hard hand slowly flexing on his shoulder. A hard, uncompromising voice behind him said: "Masterson, why are you calling me down? What don't you like about that notice?"

Masterson twisted under the grip. He screwed his head round and found himself gazing into the eyes of Norvice of the Mounted. They were sea-green eyes. But there was a bitter glimmer in them that made one think of the strong salt seas that smash round the headlands of Wrangell and Bering, rather than of the softer seas of the South. Above a splendid figure he carried a splendid head, but he had the face of an old he-hawk of the mountains, a face that had seen a lot of things and knew a lot more. It was a strong, wind-bronzed face, the face one would instinctively look for under the wide hatbrim of a Sergeant of the Mounted.

"Why do you call me down?" he reiterated.

Masterson poked a finger on the "He is probably dead." "I think that bit is damn funny," he said bluntly.

"Come over here," said Norvice, drawing him away from the excited group round the board.

"Now, look here, Masterson," he said when they were well beyond earshot, "it is highly probable that you will have to lend a hand on this job. You're a level-headed old sweat, I know, or you wouldn't be carrying the button. This is going to be a mighty big business; there's more in it than actually sticks out. Say, you can keep a still tongue when you like?"

"Sarn't, my middle name is Clam!" declared the Government man.

"A difficult name to live up to. Well, now, to get right down to brass tacks, have you seen anything of the Magain gang in your recent runs up and down river?"

"No. Not for some days."

"That's about so. They're missing. The whole bunch of 'em's melted. And when the Devil's invisible, he's hatching trouble."

"I expect they're up at . . ."

"Forget it. They're neither up at Forty Mile nor down at Dawson: and none of the camps in between have seen anything of them for a week. Now it generally happens that when that gang fades out of one camp, I hear all about it inside twenty-four hours—it's generally a frantic hurry-call from some little dog-eared show or other that has just been cleaned up. By the time we get a posse along, they are back again with a sheaf of alibis the Lord High Chancellor himself couldn't shift. But this time they've been gone over a week and they've vanished!"

"D'ye mean that . . ."

"I mean that I've put urgent inquiries through to every camp and village within a hundred miles and drawn blank everywhere. The whole bunch is missing."

"Well?"

"And so is Sitka Charley!"

"Whe-e-w! Then you think the Magain gang has—"

"Clam, you said? I said they're missing. It isn't natural for a whole tribe of stick-at-nothings to be able to do a fade-out like that. I can generally get on their trail inside a sun-round. But this time I've lost 'em. And I've lost Sitka Charley. And nothing has happened elsewhere, not even a hold-up for dust and drinks over at the Crossings. I want the Magain bunch badly. I've got warrants for them all over that Come Inside hold-up—but this is much more serious. By the way, have you heard the latest news from June Royal's shack?"

"No?"

"Endersley's memory has gone phut!"

Masterson jumped. "Wha-at?" he gasped.

"Sure nuff. The snow-fever scarred his brain—crossed out a whole year of his life—the year that matters. He can't get a line on a single day of this last twelvemonth, nor anything he has done, nor where he has been. He's a millionaire—without a million!"

"Hell!"

"You said it. It puts the whole bag o' tricks right in the hands of Sitka Charley. He's the king-pin, the key-piece of the whole affair. Hence that notice. If he's a free-nigger he will get to hear of it and he will come to me of his own free will; he will know that I'm working for his boss. If not, it will mean that the Magains have corralled him."

"Then Heaven help the Magains!" said Masterson fervently.

"A pretty compliment, but not much help. One Indian can't fight that bunch of cut-throats and get away with it."

"That so? Well, Sarn't, you don't know Charley; and I do!"

"I, at least, have a slight acquaintance—with the Magain gang," said Norvice coldly.

"Maybe, maybe. But they won't kill him. Charley's death won't do 'em any good."

"Any one of that crush would do murder for no more than that five hundred dollars reward, believe me!"

"They've got bigger game than that."

"Big? I'd say it's about ten times bigger than any one here knows!"

"Eh?"

"Sure. There's a round dozen tough looking hoodlums hanging around this locality. They're all working for a shady Skagway syndicate—they're waiting to snap up as many claims as they can lay their hands on. Bully is out for quick money. He will try to force the location of Endersley's strike from the Indian, pass the word along to the syndicate agents, and net so much for each claim they collar. If the syndicate get first stakes down, Cedar Falls won't see a cent of it. That's the outline, my son; get it? I'll be seeing you in a day or two. Clam, you said?"

It is a remarkable fact, but nevertheless true, that Sitka Charley at that precise moment was doing his valiant best to justify the tremendous regard Bat Masterson had for his fighting qualities. He was sitting with his back to the wall in the little ramshackle cabin up among the great limestone bluffs that hedged the settlement in. The cabin was one of the Magain gang's secret meeting-places. It was hidden away under the shadow of a great overhang-

ing bluff, perched precariously on a little jutment halfway down a precipice. All around rose the roar of Cedar Falls, thundering down in white cataracts of milky foam into the cold Yukon below. In front of him sat Bully Magain, eyeing him vindictively across a crudely built table.

On the table Magain laid an automatic. He placed it with the muzzle pointing in a direct line at Sitka Charley's breast, the butt within a foot of his own hand. For a minute he sat and watched him, critically considering his man. He folded his arms on the table and a flicker of evil contempt crawled into his eyes.

The Indian looked back at him coldly, unemotionally. There was a gigantic aloofness in his manner that slightly amused Magain. It seemed as though the Indian, gazing at him with the imperturbable dignity that is the hallmark of his race, was trying to convey to Magain his unbounded regret at having had to associate with him, as though the Indian was acquainting him politely with the fact that the meeting was distasteful to him.

Bully Magain spoke. He thrust his bull head forward and coldly and deliberately insulted the Indian.

"Siwash!" he said viciously. "Speak English?"

The Indian's eyes flickered once. To call a Sitka—the Rajputs of the North—a Siwash is to offer him the deepest, most wounding insult a white man's tongue can utter. The Indian pressed his elbow ever so gently into his side. The bulgy lump inside his furs gave him infinite contentment.

"Where did you get to that night—that night at the Come Inside?" asked Magain. He spoke softly, but there was a stream of steel arrows in his voice.

"I went behind the saloon; I climbed the wicket; my

people found me; they were waiting for me and they nursed me according to their own ways. White people would have given me brandy; my tongue would have chattered words I did not wish it to. My tongue obeys me not when white folk give me brandy." Sitka Charley's voice was impassive, but it came off an icebox of frozen hate.

"Well, Siwash, your tongue going to wag right now!" Magain assured him.

The Indian hugged his invisible gun.

"What have you done with Endersley's claim paper?" demanded Magain, irritated at the Indian's calm passivity.

"Endersley had no claim paper!"

"You lie! Damn your red hide, you lie!"

"I have not got it."

"Then where is it? Endersley hasn't got it!"

"Endersley may have cached it somewhere. He may have hidden it when he knew he was going snow-mad."

Magain gritted his teeth. "Listen to me, you swab," he snarled. "There is room in your chest for every darn bullet in this gun, and unless your tongue wags you will get 'em! You're eight miles away from help. There ain't a living soul nearer to you than Cedar Falls down there in the valley—except me. Me with a gun! Now, you know just where that gold strike is located and, what's more, you are going to open your face and tell me, right here and now!"

The Indian looked as though the information was news to him.

"I don't understand you," he said doggedly.

Magain picked up the gun. "I'll explain," he said acidly. There was a red blaze in his eyes and his lips were drawn tightly across his yellow teeth. "Now, see

here, I don't care a chew of 'baccy whether you go out of this shack by the door or over the Falls, nor whether you go out with your skin punctured or otherwise. That's up to you. But this much I *do* know. I tell you, Siwash, if you want to go out of here alive, you are going to tell me where Robert Endersley drove his pegs when he found gold away up beyond Five Fingers. You can tell me in two shakes. All I want is the location; it won't make any odds to you. Your boss gets his own claim if he records it in time, but that, too, is up to you. If you don't tell me, I shall shoot you; just as sure as you are sitting there, I shall shoot you. Either you have got that claim paper on you or you have not—it don't make any odds to me either way. But you sure do know where the gold is. And understand, I won't allow no yellow dog of a Siwash to step over me! Either you wag your tongue right now, or it won't never wag again. That's the whole plateful. You're a dangerous animal; you understand that, I guess. You know too much."

"If I tell you, you will shoot. If I give you the claim paper, you will shoot. What will it benefit me?"

"Then you *have* got it, you swab!"

"I *had* it—now I have not got it. You may shoot me if you will. Your first bullet will doubtless kill me. It matters little. But it will also destroy the claim paper. I warn you, white man, as sure as you press that trigger neither you nor any other man will ever see that paper again. It will be gone past all finding, gone like the snows of winter when the summer comes."

Magain looked suspiciously at the Indian.

"What do you mean?" he growled surlily.

"I mean one thing. You were foolish when you laid

your gun on the table. You did it to frighten me, but it did not frighten. Instead, it was helpful to me. You did not use your eyes, white man; you were too busy glaring at me. While your gun was lying on the table pointing at me, I slid the paper, rolled up, down the muzzle. I . . ."

"What?" A look of utter incredulity flashed into Bully Magain's face. In a maze of unbelieving bewilderment he twisted the gun round and squinted into the barrel. He did it intuitively, in a flash, as any man would. And in that flash it happened.

Sitka Charley suddenly galvanized into action.

"Up with 'em!" The words were rasped out, bitten off and spat out. Magain's startled eyes whipped across to the Indian. Sitka Charley, his eyes aflame like nuggets of blood-red gold, was on his feet. The calm, unruffled impassiveness was gone; he was literally quivering with the fury that had suddenly blazed up in him. Magain, to his utter astonishment, found himself gazing amazedly up the barrel of another gun—the Sitka's gun—a compact pound and a half of glimmering steel, lead, and cordite. It pointed, without a flicker, at the spot in his head where nose and forehead met.

"Drop your gun, white man." The Indian's voice was dour and grimly full of purpose. "If you move a muscle except to open your fingers, *I* shall shoot!" he rasped.

For some seconds they looked at each other; all the flames and passions and racial hates of a thousand ages burned and blazed in their eyes. Then Magain accepted the inevitable.

"Very clever, you red devil, very clever," he growled. "I reckon . . ."

He checked. A ghost of a smile passed over his face. His tension relaxed. From outside there came a slithering, scrambling sound. It came nearer and lower, the sound of heavy boots clambering down the bluff.

Magain grinned. "That will be Bill Haines and Coldwater Griff. Good health, Siwash," he announced.

## CHAPTER II

The knowledge that he had completely lost all count of the last year of his life came as a stunning shock to Robert Endersley. The realization that he had found a new and gigantic gold deposit somewhere in that blank in his memory brought him dangerously near to the verge of collapse.

For hours he lay and fought his torpid brain for the key-thoughts that would restore that great and wonderful year to his fevered mental grasp. In spite of Pierre Bonard's remonstrances, he worried and harried his brain till the minister began to fear for the return of a high fever. He focussed his mind with a burning eagerness on the main facts of the great things that had happened during the past year, and tried to think back to small beginnings. The intensity with which he forced his mind back along the broken trails of memory was so profound that it produced in him something of a state of self-hypnosis.

He no longer lay helpless under a pile of heated blankets in June Royal's shack on the fringe of Cedar Falls. He was no longer in the sun-drenched spring at all. He had flung himself back headlong into the winter.

He stood again on the wide white plains that sprawl away illimitably to the skylines beyond the sullen battlements of the Harper Mountains; he clawed his way again across the chaotic leagues of wilderness that roll back to the Yukon from the dead-blocks of Five Fingers, gashed across and across by ice-choked ravine and towering ironstone

ridge. He marvelled again at the dogged endurance, the amazing courage of Sitka Charley as they struggled desperately through the gales and blizzards streaming endlessly down from the polar seas. The blizzards blanketed the whole sweep of Alaska under five feet of smoking snow and then snapped off suddenly to make way for a cold snap so vicious and prolonged that it burned right into his brain.

It came in a dead flat calm, a white, deathly stillness that gorroted the land. It was cold run riot, throttling, disintegrating. The mercury in the thermometers contracted hour by hour; down it went, slipping and sliding—ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty. At thirty-five degrees below zero the quicksilver froze solid in the tubes and the spirits of wine took over the irresistible descent. The heat went off the earth to such an extent that the markings on the reinforced cylinders finally showed a level of sixty-four degrees below zero; that, on the Fahrenheit reckoning, is ninety-six degrees of frost.

It was a degree of coldness so profound that the air quivered; the atmosphere crackled. It was so cold that one could spit and watch that spittle *bounce*—an ice globule on the dead white surface of the snow crust; so cold that the sound of a tree unburdening itself of a load of snow five miles away came swishing up on the molten air as abruptly as though it were but a biscuit-toss away.

He recollected trying to light a fire the night his memory went. He remembered struggling with the sulphur-top for over half an hour in an effort to induce its yellow-green head to blaze into light. But his fingers denied him. They refused to grip the stem. He had to nurse his hand inside his furs for what seemed hours and hours before

he could infuse sufficient obedience into his fingers to make them grip and strike that match.

Thus far Endersley's auto-hypnosis took him and no farther. The crackling cold began to wear him down and break him up. It became insupportable. It sapped his powers and reduced him to a mere mechanism, a marching machine unconsciously generating its own locomotion as it went along. Then it ate into his faculties. It annihilated his memory. His mind became a confused and painful blur of whining blizzards, roaring drifters, flat calm cold snaps, amazingly dispassionate Indians, and camp-fires built on the open trail that stung his nostrils with their acrid smoke.

He tossed about on the bunk, muttering fretfully. The broken strands persistently eluded his straining grasp. They danced and dangled before him for brief flashing seconds and then slid exasperatingly away: vanished, as elusive as a whiff of perfume.

Pierre Bonard sat and watched him with troubled eyes. Endersley's mutterings took on a high-strung note and Pierre Bonard got up and went over to him. He shook him roughly by the shoulder. Robert Endersley's period of self-induced mesmerism came to an abrupt end at the point where the sulphur-top fizzed into incandescence.

"My son, I have warned you against taxing your brain," said the minister with a touch of asperity underlying the kindliness in his voice. "I have begged you to try to sleep; implored you not to tire those tiny filaments that are trying to mend themselves. You are foolish to ignore my words. More than foolish—it is ungrateful of you. Are our labours of a month, a long weary month, my son,

to be swept away in an hour because you will not exercise the grace of a little patience?''

The sick man lay back and sighed. He was silent for a long while. His hands plucked nervously at the coverlet and then crept up to his bandaged eyes.

''Pierre, I am not ungrateful, believe me,'' he pleaded. ''But you don't understand—you *cannot* understand. Old friend, your ways and mine lie too far apart. You can't realize what it means to man out on trail—to know that he has beaten Fate, played—the game through to the finish; jammed his pegs down on Gold! Found his gold brick—and lost it again.''

''My son, I think I understand—a little.''

''Yes, but, Padre, you have never been tormented by the call of the Gold Voice. You have never battled your way through the killing months on unbroken trails, lived for weeks on end on a daily minimum of flour and tea, struggled and hammered and slaved till—till every bone in your body cried out—O God! you have never dreamed your dreams—of the South, of warmth, of friends—and fun and—and all that the Gold Voice sings—you've never seen your dreams—turn into a nightmare—like this!''

''Robert Endersley, I thought you a man. You talk with the petulance of a child.''

''Pierre, old chap, I tell you again, I am not ungrateful. I can never repay you for what you have done for me. I am no greenhorn in the North—I know what I owe you! You have plucked me back—from halfway over the Long Drop. I know it. In doing that you wrought a miracle—I—I know that too. Some day, maybe, I'll be able to thank you—to show you the worth of my thanks. Such a miracle

as yours was not wrought by hours on your hands and knees before the altar. You—"

The minister smiled. There was just a shade of irony in his voice.

"The Indians in these parts have a proverb," he said—"Prayer to the gods are good for the crops, but one must hoe while the smoke goes up!"

"That—that just about fits my—our case, Pierre. A lot of hoeing and a little smoke—"

"Not so, my son; a lot of each, a lot of each."

The voices droned off into silence. It was one of those little silences that happen so often when one is about to ask a difficult question and does not quite like broaching the subject. Endersley broke it at length.

"Pierre." There was a new, diffident note in his voice that caused the Baptist uneasiness. It was harking back to his old querulousness.

"Well?"

"Why don't you send for Sitka Charley?"

"He will come, my son."

"Certainly he will, but why don't you send for him *now?*"

"Probably something delays him, my son."

The sick man twisted round in the bunk.

"Eh?" he said. "Pierre, you don't mean you don't know where he is? Pierre, don't tell me Charley is gone?"

The minister laid a soothing hand on Endersley's shoulder.

"Now, now, my friend," he said softly, "you are getting excited again. You mustn't do it. There is nothing to worry about. Sitka Charley went away. I think he did a wise thing. Maybe he went where white man couldn't

find him. It is possible he went back to the lodges of his own people."

"Yes, but, Pierre . . ."

"Sh! Sh! You must surely realize that all Cedar Falls has been out hunting for your Indian? This little settlement has been a powder mine, a volcano likely to erupt at any moment since you came down from the North. They are all intoxicated with the lust for gold. My friend, I earnestly think the Indian has done well to stay away. There are lawless characters in Cedar Falls who would—but no matter. The Canadian Mounted Police are advertising for him. He will come."

"Sure, Pierre. He will come. Sitka Charley never let me down yet."

"He did a wonderful thing for you, my friend, when he brought you down."

"He has been doing wonderful things for me ever since he picked up double harness with me, Pierre!"

"He thinks a great deal of you, Endersley."

Endersley laughed, an amused, satisfied little chuckle that came out from underneath his bandages. It carried with it the assurance that that particular little joke was a matter of perfect understanding between himself and the Sitka.

"Have you ever owned a dog?" he asked—"a real worthwhile chum-dog? One of a breed that can tell you more with his eyes than you can tell him with your mouth? That sort never attempts to query the amazing circumstances that made him a dog and you a man; instead, he just tells you that every living shred of dog-fibre in him is vibrating with untold dog-pleasure to know that you are his master and that he is your dog. Sometimes he tells you he is

darn sorry he can't talk outright to you the same as you can to him, but that, understand, is *his* fault, not yours. You *have* no faults. You're his boss; you are splendid enough to regard him as a friend of yours."

"And the Indian is like that?"

"Like that. But with this difference, Pierre. He can meet you on your own ground as a man and not a lesser breed. He's got a brain, as fighting as it's faithful."

"I delight to hear you say it. I thought that the whites, with their bottles and their cards and their eternal lusting for gold, had ended the better traits in their red brothers."

"Maybe he is a throwback, Pierre; but Sitka Charley is that sort of Indian."

"He will surely come, my friend."

"Sure he will, Pierre; he needed resting-up as much as I did."

The minister got up to put more logs in the stoves. The fresh hardwood made a prodigious crackling that defied conversation for some minutes. Pierre Bonard sat with his arms in his lap. He listened to the sputtering of the resin and a grim, reminiscent smile stole over his features. He cleared his throat and glanced across at the man on the bunk.

"Robert Endersley, my young friend, I will tell you something," he said. "But a moment ago you told me I could not understand, could not sympathize with your feelings when you knew your memory had gone—you with your fabulous mountain of gold, and your memory that will not tell you where it is. You said, my friend, that our ways were too far apart."

"Did I?"

"Yes. You inferred that I, a mere minister of God,

had no right to scold you on matters connected with such great things as you have known and done; and that because I do naught else but preach the Word in the little Mission under the Bluffs and rescue those who, from weariness, fall by the trail-side, I needs should hold my peace when you chose to rave of the works of the big men who go out along the top-trails."

"Well, I suppose that's what I meant—in a way," said Endersley lamely.

The minister broke into a dry little chuckle, half of sadness, half of amusement.

"My friend," he said, "I, Pierre Bonard, minister of God in the Baptist Mission—I, who know nothing of a strong man's emotions and despairs when he strikes gold—and loses it—I missed pegging my claim on the second great Nome strike by fifteen paltry hours."

"Good Lord!"

"That was in the long ago, when my muscles were limber, and my ears, too, were tuned to catch the whisper of the Gold Voice."

"Oh, Pierre, old man, I am sorry. A thousand times sorry. I—I cannot tell you how . . ."

"Why sorry? I offer *you* no sympathy. I cannot. I have been burned in that crucible myself; I know the fierceness of its pains. No words of mine could tell you what I feel for you. Let us forget it. We meet as brothers, owning to a common knowledge."

The sick man made a valiant effort to turn the conversation.

"Pierre," he said, "I smell flowers."

"Watermint. There are bunches at your head and mignonette at your side. There are cans of snow daisies of

every colour and variety. The snows have been gone many days. Nature told of her joy in a burst of flowerings when the last of the snows went away, a wondrous strewing of sweet carpets that hid the earth in a day. As many pots and tins as we could find, we filled. Twice a day we fill them afresh—wild thyme, jasmines, wild pinks and star flowers.'' He laughed gaily. ''My son, were you able to see, you would scarce know this cabin for a Yukon shack. Many times, sitting here in this shack, have I said to myself, 'Now could some artist alight with his skill and his brushes and his colours in this cabin wishing to paint the true picture of the inside of a Yukon shack, what a great surprise would be his!' There are curtains to the window, Robert! As God's my Faith! Dainty, needleworked curtains all aflutter to the little winds of spring. There is a coverlet on your bunk, all worked out in the pretty bead patternings of the nomads. A screen of bear fur shades the light of the window from your eyes; there are rugs on the floor. Flowers and scented herbs are dotted round on every ledge and sill.''

Endersley laughed. Such a picture as the Baptist painted rather tickled him. It sounded more like a delicate bridal arbour than the interior of a stark miner's shack.

''It's tremendously good of you to go to so much trouble, Pierre,'' he said. ''I can hardly imagine a miner's cabin looking like that. I shall better appreciate it when my bandages are off. I had no idea you were skilled with a woman's craft as well as being a minister to your flock and a reformed gold prospector. Say, Pierre, you must have worked a good many hours to have made all—''

*''Me?''* The minister sat up with a jerk. ''Surely, my friend,'' he said, ''you don't think I could have created

this picture? You don't imagine *I* could have had the good sense to choose only those flowers that are fragrant?''

Endersley's embarrassment was almost comical.

''Well, Padre,'' he muttered, ''I—I know Cedar Falls has been mighty solicitous about my welfare, but I had no means of knowing it had appointed itself a sort of needlework guild for my especial benefit.''

The minister stared hard for a moment. He got up and went over to the sick man. For a moment he looked down at the sightless bundle, a slight frown puckering his forehead; then he sat down on the edge of the bunk.

''I am sorry; I ought to have told you,'' he said quietly. ''I thought you knew.''

''Knew what, Pierre?''

''Seemingly I have been acting a lie, my son. You have been under the impression that I alone, with the help of Providence, was responsible for bringing you back from the Shadows?''

''I—I certainly had a notion that way.''

''Would you care to know there has been another with you here, day and night, never leaving you, doing more for you each hour than I could do each day?''

''You surprise me, Padre; you do, indeed! But say, trot him out. Don't be so horribly mysterious about it. Trot him out. Let me thank him. I—''

''It isn't a him, my son; it's a her.''

''I—eh? Oh! Good Lord!''

''You seem surprised. You surely know there are women to be found in nearly every little township along the Yukon Valley?''

''Ye-yes, Padre, but not—not the sort who think of sweet scented flowers for a sick man's room.''

The minister patted his arm.

"A pretty thought, my son, and one worthy of the girl who has done so much for you—indeed, the sweetest girl that ever came out of the South."

"Worse and worse! Excuse my profanity, Pierre, but this—this is the very devil!"

"Why, what is the trouble now?"

"Trouble enough, Pierre—I'm no ladies' man!" Endersley's voice was mournful almost to the point of self-pity.

The minister chuckled. "She is no—er—no ladies' lady," he returned.

"What is her name?"

"June Royal."

"That—that isn't a name, Pierre—it's a trickle of music."

"Nevertheless, that is her name; a prettier one, I grant you, was never coined. Even so, it does barely do her justice."

Endersley relaxed on the bunk muttering "June Royal, eh? June Royal!" He lingered over the words, telling them over softly to himself as one would some little phrase of untellable beauty that has suddenly captivated the ear.

"Pierre, what is she like, this girl with music in her name?"

"She is like her name, my son—beautiful. There is music in her face and figure, a melody of dainty perfection. There is just a trace of the Quebec-French in her—just enough to give her that little—but you are no ladies' man, man, you say. You would not be interested in such details."

Endersley declared his complete dissatisfaction with such an assumption.

"If you don't tell me all about her, I'll get up off this bunk and tear my blithering bandages off," he threatened.

"You impose a pleasant task, my son," said the minister, smiling. "June Royal is a rose and a lily come to life. There is the sweet beauty of a flower in her face and in her heart the fragrance. All the joys and the warm delights that drench the month of June are bound up and eternally blossoming in her. The essence of gold is the purity of June Royal. The love of life and liquid sunshine runs tumultuously through her veins. Cedar Falls is at her feet. Since June Royal came here this settlement has come as near to being well-behaved as any Yukon settlement will ever be. She knows all this, yet takes no airs or graces. She, my son, is a true child of the North, though she comes from the sun-filled South. She is as feminine as her name, yet her young body is as strong and as fearlessly founded as a tree-puma in its third year. I have seen her hit each spot on the five of spades with a revolver at thirty yards."

"Gee!" said the bandages on the bunk.

"For twenty-seven nights and days that girl has been to you a nurse beyond the greatness of a mother to her ailing son. I cannot tell you all she has done. I do not know. I have crept in now and then to watch you while she took a few hours' rest in a chair at the foot of your bunk. She—"

Endersley started up with a hot protest tumbling from his lips. "Oh, say, Pierre!" he expostulated. "There was no need for that. That was your fault entirely! The least you could have done was to make her take her proper

rest. Padre, I'm surprised at you—you, a man who has travelled the top-trails, too! Why, man, it's enough to give any girl a breakdown!"

"My son, I had no voice in that matter," said the minister austerely.

"You did. You could have insisted on her going down to her own shack and taking her proper rest!"

"This *is* her own shack."

"Oh, hell!"

"Eh?"

"I said, 'oh, hell!'—and, all respects to you, sir, I meant, 'oh, hell!' "

"You are a graceless young reprobate!"

"But—but, don't you see, Pierre, she has been here all this time with me—alone!"

"Oh, tongues have wagged, if that's what you mean. But it's little enough June Royal cares for uncharitable neighbours. It has been her against the rest of Cedar Falls, my son. You appreciate that, do you not? Ears have been pressing against these walls ever since you were laid on that bunk, shouting and babbling of gold—ears that were waiting for you to tell them where your gold was to be found. Oh, surely, tongues have wagged! Some of them tried taunting her to force your secret from her. The chance they had! I would not let that thought worry you. My son, so surely as three people are gathered together in one place for more than a day, two of them will begin talking scandals about the third. Cedar Falls is no exception. There are several women here—women of the dance halls. Poor creatures, their tongues were bound to wag!"

Endersley turned his face to the wall. He was profoundly, miserably silent.

The old minister's voice went on inexorably: "But what matter that? If the angels themselves had come down out of heaven and joined in the general wagging of tongues, June Royal would have stayed on here, with you!"

"Pierre, my debt to that girl piles itself up every second!"

"It does, indeed!"

"Where is she now?"

"Sleeping."

"Where?"

"At the Mission. She is worn out. This morning, when your soul came back from its wandering across the infinities, she went down to the Mission to sleep."

"Is she coming back?"

"I don't think so. Now, you must be quiet and go to sleep. You must show your gratitude to her by getting well quickly—and giving her back her cabin."

The light was weakening. Long shadows were sliding back out of the west. The sun, a great round ball, coppery as a new-minted penny, afloat in a sea of crimson cloud-rags, was settling down on the sky rim. Already a great lone star sat high in the north, clear and unwinking, like a white diamond drop far up in the evening sky. Soon it would be twilight, the soft, gentle twilight of an hour when the brittle white daylight of the North would soften and tone itself to a mellow dusk. When that dusk came, Pierre Bonard was to take off the bandages from Endersley's injured eyes. As soon as that great flaming penny had gone down behind the mighty Yukon, the sick

man was to know whether his eyes had gone as well as his memory.

Bonard sat and watched the shadow-cast of the window crawl steadily up the logs on the opposite wall. The ribald clamour of the waterfowl down on the creeks and lakes came up faintly on the evening air. A great wedge of wild duck went winging slowly up the northward flight, bound for the frozen mating-grounds on the shores of the Beaufort Sea. After them came the solan geese, great kings of the Northern wastes, black-tipped razor wings cleaving strongly through the darkening skies, their strident calls echoing back from the silences long after they had swung out of sight beyond the ridges. A wolf-howl, long-drawn and wildly desolate, rang down from the limestone Bluffs, waited vainly for an answer from its mate in the dripping brushwood below and quavered again mournfully.

Pierre Bonard moved, silently, so that the sick man might not hear him.

Half an hour passed; the shadow crawled slowly up the wall and as slowly faded in the gathering dusk.

The minister got up off his knees. He touched Endersley on the arm. "Are you awake, my son—are you ready?" he asked.

"I—I've been waiting for you, Padre."

The minister began to unfasten the bandages. Fold by fold he took them off, pausing a few minutes between each lest the too rapid accretion of light injure the weakened retinas. Deftly and gently his fingers played round the sick man's head, refolding each bandage as he unwound it. When only three folds remained, he stopped and displaced the lint pads.

"Shall I go on, my friend?"

Endersley nodded: his hands were gripping the coverlet feverishly.

Bonard unwound two more folds, slowly and with infinite care. Only one fold remained and the minister asked: "Can you see anything yet? Do you notice any difference in the light?"

"Not—a—not a thing, Padre!" Endersley's voice was dead level.

"Can you *now?*"

"No!"

The minister trembled a little. The last fold was off.

Endersley lay back on the pillows, breathing in little hurried jerks. His head was lost in the shadows that were filing into the cabin. The Baptist looked for a minute at the man on the bunk. He tried to speak, tried to say something, something that would tell Endersley a little of the torrent of sympathy coursing through his soul. But the words would not come; the wells of his speech dried up, they parched in his throat. He went over to the window, propped his arms on the sill, and stared out into the dusk to where the great Yukon slid like a mammoth ribbon of satin and silver into the purple afterglow of the sunset. The balsam of pine and cedar hung heavy on the air: a faint, scarce perceptible scent of musk-brier drifted up from the undergrowth.

"Pierre?"

"Yes, my son?"

"Would you—do me a favour—please?"

Bonard turned away from the window. "Anything in the world, my laddie, that I can do for you, I will do eagerly. I would give you the sight from one of my own

eyes were it possible." The old minister's voice was pregnant with the deep sadness of a burning sincerity.

Endersley looked up and smiled, an odd, confused, half-ashamed smile.

"I—I don't mind about this—this business—so much as all that, old chap," he said with an effort at cheerfulness. "My sight will come back all right; snow-blindness isn't permanent, you know. It will come back—sure as Sitka Charley will come back."

"That is a brave way to take such a blow as that, my son."

"Don't worry about it, Pierre. I want to—to ask you something. You see, I—I've an idea that—that Miss June Royal will be coming back here to-night."

"Maybe, son, maybe. You don't mind?"

"No, but, Padre; could I—er—"

"What is it, son?"

Endersley took his courage in both hands. Like a schoolboy who for ten minutes has been screwing his courage up to ask for another piece of cake, he suddenly blurted out: *"Can I have a shave?"*

Secure in the knowledge that Endersley couldn't see him, the minister of God grinned; he eased up the tension of an hour of strain and difficulty by letting his dry, weather-beaten old features relax into as joyful a grin as any of his flock had ever seen.

"Robert Endersley, you amaze me," he said. "You—you and your 'no ladies' man'!"

Endersley grinned, too.

"That's why!" he declared. "Being no ladies' man, I—I can't face that wonderful girl with the terrific disadvantage of about six months' stubble on my face!"

The minister, chuckling hugely to himself, went down to the Mission and fetched his razors. Between them they cut the whiskers and soaped and lathered and shaved until even Endersley was satisfied that his terrific disadvantage had been removed.

"Endersley," said the minister, after he had cleared away the traces of the invalid's toilette, "you must have your eyes bandaged again. Just for a week, my son, no more. Perhaps by then they—"

"Not yet, Padre, not yet," said Endersley hurriedly. He was looking more uncomfortable, more confused than ever. "Leave them for a little while. The bandages make my head ache. To-morrow—"

He broke off on a word. The latch of the door had clicked. A slow flush mounted his cheeks; he turned his head instinctively toward the door. Slowly and silently the door opened. A dainty gauntleted hand pushed it wider and wider, until it bumped softly against the wall inside. June Royal, as adorable a picture of feminine loveliness as ever the North delighted in, stood framed in the doorway. One arm was thrown across her breast, prisoning a great armful of faintly luminous star flowers, fresh gathered and aromatic with the sweetness of night-scented stock; the other was outstretched to the door handle. Her eyes, full of eager, leaping, solicitous questions for her patient's welfare, were turned full on the minister. She knew that Endersley's bandages were to be taken off that night and every atom of her was asking, demanding the answer to the question they had solved.

But the question was answering itself. She read it in the Baptist's sombre silence, read it in the neat pile of folded bandages on the little table, and in the sight of

Endersley propped up among the pillows staring straight ahead of him in a fixed, unwavering stare at the light-screen; read it, and let the star flowers fall in a heap, unheeded, to the floor. They lay in a shimmering pool, like a dim halo round her feet. She stood, with her hands plucking nervously at the little fringe of white fox fur on her dress, scarce comprehending, scarce believing the truth of the answer she read.

For a moment she looked swiftly from the minister to the man on the bunk and back again. Then she hurried into the cabin, right up to the minister.

"Oh, Pierre, not blind!" she whispered. "Oh, surely, not blind!" Her breath was coming and going as rapidly as though she had been running hard.

Pierre Bonard muttered and turned his head away.

She turned quickly to the man on the bunk. "Oh, you poor, poor soul!" she cried impulsively.

Endersley turned his head toward her. Her own eyes, lustrous and burning with sympathy, sought his and held them; with a little womanly gesture of friendship she sat on the bunk close to him and took his hands in a warm, impulsive clasp. For a full minute neither said a word. She looked into his strained, unflickering eyes as though striving to pierce the hurt in them. Slowly she bent her head, closer, closer. Because she knew there was a great black darkness behind those eyes, because she knew they could not see what she did, she bent right down to him and her lips touched his hair.

Just for a second she sat—and then her little moment of sentiment vanished, flickered out of existence as though it had been exploded. June Royal sat back with a hurried little intake of breath. For reasons known only to Robert

Endersley and herself she began to flush—more, she blushed, deeply and furiously. Her colour came mounting up in waves until her cheeks were scarlet.

For Robert Endersley had begun to smile; his eyes, shining bright as silver in the shadows, were literally drinking her in, devouring her beauty line by line, revelling unashamedly in the most fascinating vision of winsome delightfulness his eyes had ever seen. She was aware, all in a frantic, palpitating second, that Endersley was looking at her with *eyes that saw,* eyes that embraced every inch of her with the thrilling, open sincerity of honest admiration.

"Perfect — glorious — and absolutely wonderful!" he whispered.

June Royal snatched her hands away in a riotous tumult of chagrin, joy, mortification, and relief. She sprang back off the bunk, with a look of astonished dismay on her face that was so obvious as to be almost laughable.

"You—you—utter *scamp,* you!" she gasped. "Oh, you wicked, awful, deceitful humbug!"

Pierre Bonard wheeled in amazement. The tableau that met his eyes was clear, sufficient, and illuminating.

June Royal was standing away from the bunk, her hands pressed tightly against her breast, blushing to the roots of her hair. She was staring at Robert Endersley, who, being no ladies' man, had incontinently taken flight under the bedclothes, where he was laughing as hugely and as delightedly as a schoolboy who has just achieved a second and yet a third lump of cake.

For some seconds she remained staring at the mound of shaking bedclothes; then Pierre Bonard caught her eyes. They were brimful and spilling over with unshed laugh-

ter, her face was a bubbling animation of silent merriment.

"Well, Pierre, what do you know about *that!*" she demanded.

Endersley, under the bedclothes, mentally told himself that he had never heard anybody with a voice like that before in all his life. It was the essence of music, the sheer gold and silver of music reduced to the thrill of a human voice.

"Come out, sir. Come out immediately," she commanded imperiously.

Endersley emerged and found himself looking at a slim, pliant young figure with her hands on her hips and a most severe look on her face. "I've a good mind to turn you out of my cabin, bag and baggage," she declared.

"If you do," he returned grimly, "I shall sit on the doorstep all night, catch pneumonia and asthma and housemaid's knee and all sorts of awful things—and all you'll find in the morning will be my poor dead body."

She turned to the minister. "He isn't a tiny bit ashamed of himself," she complained.

"He isn't," came from the bunk. "I certainly owe an apology to Pierre, a very humble apology for playing him that trick. He asked me if I could see when he took the last bandage off, and I swore I couldn't. The reason, in all probability, was that I had got my eyes shut! But to you, Princess, I would not dream of apologizing. It was your own fault. It was certainly no fault of mine that you are so—so perfect, glorious, and absolutely wonderful!" he declared brazenly. "Pierre had painted you in such wonderful colours to me that—that I carried a picture of you under my eyelids. A wonderful picture, Princess—

and I knew that if you came in to-night I should have to stare at you. And it's rude to stare."

"Well, sir, what of that?"

"So I let you stare at me! I repeat it was all your fault—you shouldn't have been so amazingly adorable, so absolutely—"

"Open your mouth, sir!"

"I don't want to. I'm doing very well as it—"

"Open your mouth!" She stamped her foot.

Endersley opened his mouth, weakly and meekly. June Royal poked a clinical thermometer under his tongue.

"The poor man is as feverish as he can be," she said with a wicked glance at Bonard. "It is perfectly awful—I can't leave him for even a few hours but what you let him get completely out of hand. What on earth have you been letting him talk about to get into that state?"

Pierre Bonard, for some unfathomable reason, appeared to be acutely interested in the ceiling at that particular moment.

"I don't know at all, my dear," he said vaguely. "To the best of my knowledge, he has merely been bewailing his own assertion that he was no ladies' man."

"Pierre, you are as bad as the rest!" she said in mock dismay. "Deary me! Cedar Falls seems to be getting into a fearful pickle."

She took the thermometer from Endersley's mouth. "Ha—as I thought! Nearly a hundred, you bad man."

"I'm amazed that it isn't more!" said the sick man blandly.

June Royal's reply never came. There was an interruption. A fourth party entered. As boldly, as unexpectedly, as unceremoniously as when the Magain gang

made their startling appearance at the Come Inside, the door was violently opened. Furthermore, it was violently slammed again. But in the single second that elapsed between the opening and the slamming, the fourth party was fairly and squarely in the room. He stood with his back to the door, a blue-glimmering automatic in his hand and a dour, dogged, unfriendly look in his eyes. Those eyes, black, shrewd, and piercing, ranged the cabin and its occupants one by one, resting on each and sizing them up in a brief analytical second. Short he was, and wiry, red-brown as a chestnut, clothed in loose beaded leather from neckband to moccasins and about his head was the white pulka band of the Sitka Chiefs.

"Charley! Why, skin my shins if it isn't Charley! Come right in, you old sweat! I—I've been waiting for you!" Endersley was sitting up on the bunk, bright-eyed and gabbling.

The Indian came into the shack, right up to the bunk. He utterly ignored June Royal and the minister: he had already placed them as "safe." He slid his gun into his jacket and held out his hand to Endersley. "I'm pleased," he announced.

The light had nearly gone. Inside the shack it was almost dark. He stood for a moment in the circle of firelight thrown from the open maw of the Yukon stove; it burned his features to fiery bronze, and his sleek black hair to burnished jet. He looked speculatively at Endersley for a little while, felt his limbs to see how he was building, then jerked a casual finger over his shoulder toward June Royal.

"She pull you round?" he asked.

Endersley pulled the Indian's head down to the level

of his mouth and whispered in his ear, long and earnestly. When he had finished, Sitka Charley straightened up, looked hard at the girl—and delivered his verdict.

"Good gal, very good gal," he declared, and fetched a stool from a corner and sat down.

"I am come," he said, "to talk of many things; and of one thing. Many things can wait, but of one thing I will talk to you—to-night!" He addressed himself solely to Endersley. The others seemed to have faded completely from his mind—nonentities entirely.

Endersley propped himself on one elbow and nodded. "Sure, Charley. Sergeant Norvice, of the Canadian Mounted, has been chasing round for you. You see, I'm told I found a number-one sized, cracker-jack gold mine somewhere in the back-end of our last run; but the cold got me; memory went back on me, don't know a dad-blamed thing about it and—"

"I've seen Norvice, one half an hour ago. I could not come sooner. Las' week I was coming, but a man—he call himself Magain—he corralled me one night as I sat at my camp-fire on the Bluffs."

"*What?*"

"But I got away," continued the Indian imperturbably.

"But say, man, did he—"

"I told him nothing! All I told him was—I had a gun, too. He didn't know. He was very surprised. Bimeby 'long came two more; his friends. I made Bully Magain get under the table; I got under with him; quick, all very quick. I pushed my gun in his ear and he didn't move when his two friends looked in. It was very dark in the corner under the table; their eyes were strained from the

glare outside. All they said was, 'Not there, damn him!' And they went away. Bimeby I went away, too.''

Endersley was grinning broadly. Out of the corner of his eye he could see June Royal. Her face was all bewitchingly puckered up with delighted appreciation, and her shoulders were shaking.

''I come to tell you where we find our gold! Eh?''

''That's the idea, Charley. Maybe if you tell me the yarn as it happened, my blessed memory will pick up its stride again. Pierre, Miss Royal, get a couple of chairs, will you, please, and sit around. What? Only one chair? One of you will have to sit on the bunk, then, and I hope you'll do your duty, Pierre, and take the chair. Splendid. Now we can get along. Maybe you good people can put the main questions to Charley if he gets off the track?''

The Sitka folded his arms in his lap. Slowly and impassively he began his story. His voice, a slow, monotonous rumble, deep and severe, yet utterly serene, echoed sombrely through the cabin. He sat like a sphinx, motionless, stolid, and he spoke as a sphinx would surely speak—without the slightest trace of feeling or emotion.

'' 'Twas seven months ago that the frost devils entered you, seven months ago that your tongue first began babbling of things that were foolish and beyond belief. We were camped on an unmade trail six days' dog-run above Five Fingers. The cold was such that even I was cold. We journeyed on by way of Nanayak's and Ace High, by way of Bonehead Creek and the Great Fish River. You would not rest; ever your demand was that we push ahead. Over the Teslin Pass we went, over and beyond into the Koyukuk Flats, where the great winds drone over from the northeast. One by one the dogs died. Bandy, Lizzi-

beth, Flatface, Talamon, Goodboy, Tawny—one by one they lay down to death and we cut them up and fed them to the others. All save Sunnygold. Sunnygold survived. She, the finest dog I have ever led, refused to die. Lean and starving, the last of our team, you would not kill her. You drove her away. We could have lived many days on the meat that was still on her bones, lived and grown strong again. Yet you would not have her killed. I am pleased. She was the finest dog I ever called to, the finest leader dog of any team in the North. There are many fine teams and many fine leaders on the open trails of the big-river countries, but of them all Sunnygold was the finest. I am pleased we did not eat."

Endersley was sitting up, wildly excited. "Yes, yes. Go on!" he breathed. "It's coming back—it's coming back. Sunnygold! Yes, I remember her—and all the other dogs: go on, Charley."

"By long and devious ways we came at last to the Nahoni country, which is a strong country, a savage country. Three great mountains rear up from the range that bars the entrance, three great mountains that poke their snows up to the sky and stand their guard like three braves guarding the gateway to the country beyond. We christened them the Three Captains. By the third one on the right we found our gold! A small hill, a foothill, lying in the hollow at the foot of the right-hand Captain, stood between us. You stumbled as we climbed it. You slipped. You slid into a cup where the snow had not penetrated, a small crevasse which pointed south. The winds, which blow never from the south, had left it bare of snow. In that crevasse you found gold. Lumps of it. Bunches of it. A storehouse of it. It was as though the Manitou had

made this great reserve store of gold—a reserve against the everlasting thefts of the white men—and cached it there.

"There we shall find our gold again. There in the crevasse that points southward in the cup of the little hill that stands under the southern shadow of the last of the Three Captains. There our great wealth lies. We shall find it again, out there by the trail that leads on into the Nahoni country by way of the Captains Three. When the snows are down again, when winter has come with its snow for the sledges to slide across—"

June Royal's hand slid across his mouth. Without surprise, without emotion, the Sitka turned and looked at her. A forefinger was pressed warningly to her lips, in her eyes an urgent appeal for silence. Her head was thrust forward in an intense attitude of listening. The cabin suddenly became deathly silent. From outside came a faint noise, a mere scratch, a scrape, near the door.

June Royal rose, silent as a shadow. On tiptoe she crossed to the door and flung it open. Outside, with leering, ironical grins on their faces, stood Bully Magain, Bill Haines, and Coldwater Griff, crouching, with their ears to the crack in the door jamb.

They straightened up. With a coarse laugh Magain raised his hat. "Good evening to you, lady," he said. "Say, boys, ain't she just the purtiest wench north of Yakutat Bay? Take a look at her! Ain't she fine?"

Coldwater Griff's gun was out in a flash. "Hey, Siwash! Up with 'em!" he yelled.

Sitka Charley's hand had been slowly crawling toward his jacket. Bonard whispered in his ear and the Indian, without a flicker of annoyance, put his hands, palms upward, on the bunk.

"Gentlemen, I'm obliged to you!" Magain spat his respects on the floor. "I consider your little entertainment a very friendly, helpful act. Very sweet of you! And 'specially the Siwash there. Very kind of him, I must say. So that little gold stake is over by Nahoni, is it, Si? Stuck in a crevasse in the foothill at the bottom of the right-hand mountain as you go north, eh? Allow me to thank you. And while I'm at it, I'll correct your geography. Men who go leg-liftin' around the top-trails ought to know the correct lay of the land. Them three mountains ain't the Three Captains. Their right name is the Toreadors. I know that country well! G'night, folks!"

They turned on their heels and went brazenly out into the night. June Royal stood by the doorway stunned.

Over by the bunk Sitka Charley looked at Endersley and Pierre Bonard looked at them both. An absolute silence reigned, the silence of shock, helplessness, bewilderment. The Indian, with his head screwed round, watched them running swiftly down the footpath. In a couple of minutes they were at the foot of the Bluffs, climbing rapidly up the narrow track that led over the top to the open country beyond.

June Royal closed the door, listlessly, as though her world had been knocked upside down. Pierre Bonard sighed heavily. He looked at Endersley. "My friend," he said, "Fate seems to be dealing you some heavy blows."

Endersley shrugged his shoulders. "Couldn't be foreseen, couldn't be helped," he muttered. "Just sheer bad luck. Charley couldn't help that. Good Lord! Fancy that gang of cut-throats risking their necks in Cedar Falls—shall I hurry down to the Police Post? Norvice might be there. He could get his men up by—"

Endersley shook his head. "Not an earthly chance," he said. "Those devils will be over the Bluffs and heading up toward Nahoni inside two hours. They and their crowd of dishwashers will clean the place up before Norvice could get his nose in. Magain has got us beat."

Sitka Charley stirred on his stool. He glanced up toward June Royal, who had come over and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Have they gone—gone past coming back?" he asked.

She nodded. "I—I'm afraid so, Charley," she said miserably.

The Indian faced round at Endersley again. In a dead flat voice he said: "White man, I do not like those men. To-night they are starting out for the Nahoni Mountains, which are more than two hundred miles to the north. I wish them a peaceful journey. I wish them a soft, untroubled journey." A fierce glitter, like the sparkle of a red-hot coal, shot into his eyes for a tiny second and then vanished. Calmly and inscrutably he added a postscript—a placid footnote that fell on their ears like drops of liquid electricity:

"For they will find no gold at the end of it," he growled. "Now, listen well, white man. I will tell you where it was we found our gold!"

# CHAPTER III

Sergeant Ralph Norvice, of the Canadian Mounted, sat in his matchboard office in the Police Post, critically examining a dozen fat lumps of yellow metal. It was curious-looking stuff, an agglomeration of stalky nodules and smoothly rounded bubble edges, like pieces of shining yellow slag. Back in the lost ages when the cooling earth was writing up its own autobiography on seething rock and molten stone the stuff *had* bubbled. It had seethed and boiled like so much yellow pitch in a colossal cauldron, sublimating and purifying its own peerless content for uncountable reckonings of time.

And then, in an hour, in a moment, it had solidified, slid out to the edge of the molten mass of the millions and billions of tons of block-gold which, the old Klondikers say, still lies buried somewhere down there, miles deep in the crust of the earth—the main gold-core, the parent lode of all the veins that ever squeezed up to the light of day in Alaska or America, Africa or Australia.

Norvice picked up the biggest nugget, a sizeable lump of about ten or eleven ounces. On the table lay an open strong-box, containing the other yellow lumps, together with his own official account of the amazing advent of Robert Endersley to Cedar Falls. That "Endersley Dossier" was in the running to make Klondike history.

Already the pale glowlight of night was crawling across the summer grandeur of the Yukon Valley, and an odorous paraffin lamp swinging overhead, splashed sparks of

liquid fire on the gold. It flashed and glittered like the eyes of a thousand gnomes, full of delighted merriment at the irony of the story the nuggets told.

Norvice studied the lump with the calculating eye of a man who knew what gold was, as distinct from what it ought to be. Fifteen years in the North and ten with the Mounted had tempered him to the point of a chronic unbeliever. His sourness was the sourness of a man to whom every day has brought its own fresh disillusionment. Under that pendent paraffin lamp, his harsh eyes staring at the lump of some one else's gold, Norvice appeared as the perfectly evoluted product of the system which makes one man a lawmaker and the next a lawbreaker. Norvice was the odd-man-out: the man who upheld the order of the law among both parties and had long since come to the conclusion that each is as bad as the other. He had rubbed shoulders, spring, summer, fall, and winter with the best and the worst, and his verdict was that the best are only good because it suits them and because the Mounted has a confoundedly long arm, a devilish fast horse, and a damnably excitable trigger-finger. The worst are bad because they can't be any worse than they are, and because they don't give a hoot for the Mounted or for any one else in or out of Gehenna. He had the air of a man who was dog-weary of the Mounted life, utterly and finally fed-up with the eternal effort of keeping the upper hand of the worst, and a cold, unbelieving eye on the best. And yet, if you suggested that he quit, turned it up, and went South, the uncompromising eyes under the wide hatbrim would suddenly burn red as crimson marbles and Ralph Norvice would be a good man to keep away from for some time to come.

He threw the nugget back on the table and glared at it.

"Laugh, you yellow devil!" he rasped. "Go on, grin—and kid yourself you're making a fool of me. Every darned nugget in the North is just one leering, unhealthy grin, a jeer at a man who can't hit back. Every nugget in the North hollers aloud that it knows where all the others are hid—and then smirks like a schoolgirl and says it won't tell! And you think it's a bit of a joke to sit there and pull a man's leg about it, don't you, you dumb flaming liar. Gold, you're made of the souls of all the bad women that ever breathed. You're Cleopatra and Helen of Troy and Jezebel and—and a great big lump of saloon-women to hold you together. And say, that's your colour all right—yellow all through. Eve? Eve never fuddled her old man's head with talk about apples: she slid her face up behind his ear and whispered about a gold stake she'd found.

"You jade: you're sitting there vamping me! But see here, m'lady, you don't get *me*. No, not by a thousand miles! I'm better a man than you are a woman. I'm Norvice, madam, Norvice of the Mounted, and you won't send *me* stampeding up beyond Five Fingers with an itching gold pan in my hands and a lump in my throat the size of a claim-peg. No, ma'am. You're a heartless old hag. I've known hired women with a fairer sense of justice than you. Bah! A million! That's your song, ain't it, you shrew, a million. And you think you can wean every man in the world with that, don't you? Well, right here, m'lady, you debit yourself with a failure. I travel the same trail as Pierre Bonard where you're concerned. I spit at you. I . . ."

He drew his gun and pointed it at the doorway.

"Come in!" he shouted. "Don't hang around there like a snoopin' coyote; come in!"

Henderson entered, Henderson of the Come Inside.

"Evenin', Sergeant," he said tersely. "Just got hold of a block of news. Thought you ought to know. Came straight along as soon as . . ."

Norvice put his feet on the table and lolled back in his chair. He twisted a long cheroot into a corner of his mouth.

"Shoot, boy!" he said. "Trying to start up a bunch of excitement in the Police Post? G'wan, tell me you've seen Sitka Charley sneaking into Cedar Falls. G'wan, tell me you've watched him come crawling down out of the Bluffs and make zigzag tracks for June Royal's cabin. Tell me he went in and started spieling up the complete narrative of the year Endersley can't remember. Tell me you saw the Magain gang foxing along behind him like a handful of double-harnessed mountain cats. Tell me they're up at June's shack now, listening to Sitka Charley's yarn. Aw! G'wan! Tell me somethin'!"

Henderson stared at him with round, wide-open eyes.

"Who the thunder'n hell told you?" he shouted.

"A little bird about the size of a Sitka."

Henderson swallowed twice, like a fresh-hooked cod; then a flare of anger sprang into his face.

"Then what are you doin' squattering around here?" he blazed. "Why ain't you rustlin' a crowd of the boys up to corral the swabs? You got warrants for 'em all, ain't you? Or do you think us folks in Cedar Falls hang out joy banners when that gang of he-devils hang up their hats on our town pegs? Why don't you take the chance

the good Lord sends and rope 'em in? What's up—skeered?''

Slowly the cigar came out of Norvice's mouth. Slower still his feet came off the table and he stood up.

''What?'' he jerked.

''I asked you what you was skeered about,'' repeated Henderson.

Norvice thrust his face up against the saloon keeper's. ''Josh Henderson,'' he said viciously, ''if I didn't know you were just an ordinary, natural-born sort of lunatic, I'd—I'd smash your fool face in.''

The older man eyed the six foot of bone and muscle up and down for a moment, speculatively. There was an assertive, unrepentant poise about him when he said: ''Mebbe, mebbe. But look ahere, Mister Policeman. Las' time that string of hoboes lit into Cedar Falls they landed in my bar. And they tickled my wad for two thousand dollars' worth of stock, and I haven't finished puttin' all the patches in yet. They'll land in my bar agen and pass me another dose the same as las' time—but not if I know it! Here, gimme your gun. I'll go across and pump the skunks so full of lead you'll want a steam crane to lift their darn coffins.''

Norvice switched his gun out of reach.

''Ease it up: ease it up,'' he growled. ''There's only one thing worse than short sight and that's stone blindness. It's a marvel to me you see your way about at all; you're about the blindest old bat south of the Pole. That Indian isn't telling 'em anything that will make 'em rich. He's relieving himself of a bunch of dope that will send Magain, Haines, and Coldwater Griff battling away up toward the Nahoni Mountains. They will be taking the whole crowd

of Skagway agents up there with them. I want to fix that bunch of thieving stiffs as well as the Magains. If we get them shifted off the skyline for a week or two, maybe it will give Cedar Falls miners a chance to get their pegs in big on the Endersley strike."

"Oh!" Henderson's spurt of anger seemed to have cooled in a hurry. Norvice's terse exposition was its own soporific. The new aspect mollified him considerably.

"Yes, 'oh,' you irritable old mule. Endersley wants it that way. He's a fine feller, hundred per cent *man*, and he wants all the pickings to come to the folk who helped him down here. I've been up and seen him and he's plumb anxious to have a smack at the Magain gang on his own hook. I should say he's some scrapper, too, for all he looks a bit of a drawing-room boy. Up to date I've only got the Magains on half a dozen small counts, some of which I can't prove and some of which they can shoot me a sheaf of alibis. I figure that if we can keep 'em on the jump till Endersley is strong enough to hit the trail again, we can land 'em all for a lifer, or maybe even string 'em up, on the major claim-jumping charge."

"Oh," said Henderson again and scratched his head and rubbed his ear—the infallible resource of all fair-minded men who find themselves in the wrong. He slid gracefully off the high-horse by picking up one of the nuggets and asking, with a great civility, "This Endersley's specimen stuff?"

"Yep. Great stuff, eh? A1 all through. Those bits have been setting my nerves on edge for over a month. Endersley says that pockets of that stuff are lying around up there as thick as cherries in a pie—and they've been reminding me about it every night since Sitka Charley

brought him down. Terrible stuff, gold—when it starts talking."

Henderson cast an appraising eye over the specimens. "There's *thirteen* of the perishin' things there," he said, with the air of a man who is making the profound statement of a kill-joy.

"So I noticed—a month ago," said Norvice grimly. "Somebody's goin' to be unlucky on this strike. I was just telling 'em, when you came in. I was just telling 'em it won't be me!"

Both men turned slowly and faced round to the opposite wall whereon was pinned a composite picture of three men. Three ugly scowling faces looked out of that photograph, faces that were seared and brutalized by the viciousness of their savage natures. The placard was headed WANTED, and a caption gave the names to the rest of the law-abiding world—Bully Magain, Coldwater Griff, and Bill Haines.

Norvice's eyes narrowed to red pinpoints. "Good health, gentlemen," he said venomously. "You'll need it!"

Henderson plucked at his sleeve and pointed out through the doorway. In the pale darkness three great heavy figures could be faintly made out running away from June Royal's shack. Buffalo-like humps on their backs told their own tale of stampeding kits already packed for a quick getaway.

The saloon-keeper watched them go. For a minute he waited with a troubled frown over his eyes, then he muttered: "Well, where's the gal? Why ain't she with 'em?"

Norvice looked at him quickly.

"What girl?" he asked.

"Nell o' the Dance Halls—she was with 'em when they was trailing down after the Sitka."

"*What?*" Norvice rammed the word out.

"Sure she was. Tailing off behind 'em as though she was one of the bunch herself."

"Hellcat! Stay here till I'm back, Josh." Norvice, streaking away toward June Royal's shack, flung the words over his shoulder.

The three outlaws had completely vanished by the time he was within striking distance of the isolated cabin. They had reached the foot of the Bluffs and were lost to sight among the cluttering rubble of boulders, the débris of centuries that choked the approaches to the Bluffs. Norvice crawled stealthily round the shack. Everything was amazingly quiet; except for the dull murmur of the Falls the night was soundless. Then as he crept nearer another, more definite sound, merged on the silence: the low, monotonous drone of Sitka Charley's voice mumbling steadily in the shack. Once it was punctuated by a suppressed burst of feminine laughter which rang out gaily for a moment and was as quickly stifled when the Indian's voice picked up the slow thread of his narrative. Twice June Royal came to see if any more eavesdroppers were hanging around; saitsfied that they had at least stolen a march on Cedar Falls, she closed the door and Charley's voice continued.

Norvice guessed that the Sitka was telling the true story of the Endersley gold strike and he was sorely puzzled to know what had become of the dance girl. He could not see her round the shack, and it was obvious that June Royal had failed to see her when she opened the door.

Then he saw her. A faintly darker figure of black against the black of the log wall.

Hers was a neat dodge. She was standing, or stooping, on the water-butt. So closely was she pressing to the wall and so low was she crouching that Norvice had to look again to make sure she was not merely a shadow in the darkness. He stood stock still and watched her. After a minute she proved herself to be substance and not shadow. She slowly stood up, pressing her ear against the joint of the curtained windows. Norvice crawled forward.

He came up behind her as silent as the shadow of a great snow owl that went gliding noiselessly past the white disc of the moon. There came a soft click, a sharp intake of breath, and Norvice was creeping away from the shack again. He walked slowly, clumsily. He couldn't well do otherwise, for in his arms he carried the straining body of Nell o' the Dance Halls, one hard-skinned hand clamped over her mouth as mercilessly as a metal gag.

A couple of hundred yards from the shack he set her down; his hand slipped from the mouth and flexed on her wrist like a steel bracelet.

She winced with the pain, but glared her defiance at him. He pulled her close to him with a rough jerk and stared angrily into her face. "What's—what's the game?" he growled.

The girl was silent and he shook her. "Out with it, harpy, what's the game?" There was a cold, snapping timbre in his voice that made it positively frightening, and his eyes were as cold and callous as his voice.

"Oh, please! You're hurting my wrist!"

"I'd like to be hurting your neck, you vixen. Cedar Falls and the locality around would be well rid. You're

ten thousand times worse than Magain himself. A man can meet a man, and beat him, on his own ground, which is man-ground, fists and bullets and brains and, maybe, a rope and a branch; but you, you devil, you play on your sex and you think you can get away with it on *me!* I can stand a man when—"

"Oh, please let go my wrist."

"—he comes butting his nose up into my business; because then he automatically becomes *my* business and I can—"

"Please, please!"

"—punch his particular nose. But you darned females are different. Now, see here! I've got no call against you as a saloon-woman: that's your own lookout; if you chose to get your living that way it's no business of mine. I'm no censor of public morals; the North ain't no Sunday school and the Mounted ain't no schoolmasters, not yet, though Lord knows what the Force is coming to. But, say, woman, when you start joining forces with claim-jumpers, thieves, and rough-house bullies, well, I guess it's time to make you squeal. Women are like horses. They want the spur and the whip to keep 'em in order; that's unless they happen to become real downright outlaws, no-goods, not even for the stud. Then their sole requirement is a bullet, three inches behind the ear."

He flung her away from him, viciously.

"Go back to Dawson, back to Forty Mile," he rasped. "Back to the dance halls and stay there. For so sure as I find you hanging around Cedar Falls again, I'll flay the living hide off you. Gals of your trade ain't wanted in this camp. There's no hall here and only one saloon, and, anyway, a woman who double-crosses in the pay of a

bunch of cut-throats ain't wanted anywhere on earth."

Norvice was no dancing fool, no masculine ornament to a ballroom. His bone-hard grip on the girl's wrist had chafed the skin till the blood trickled. And he stood in front of her as though he would like to do the same with her throat.

She stood a little way from him, holding a handkerchief to her lacerated wrist, looking him full in the eyes, without resentment, without shame.

"I—I'm not going back to the dance halls," she said. Her voice trembled.

Norvice's eyes flickered. "Don't try to pull that stuff on me," he said acidly. "I once went to see 'East Lynne,' way down in Medicine Hat—and I was tickled to death."

Tears started to the dance girl's eyes, and she looked away. "It's—it's not fair; it doesn't give a girl a chance when even the Mounted try to drive her back to the gin-bars, when she's trying to quit," she muttered. "That—that ain't the Mounted's job—driving a girl back to—that."

"*Me!*" Norvice flared up in his exasperation. "Me drive you to it? Damme, I'm doing my darndest to drive you out of Cedar Falls. You're a pioneer on your game in this camp and I'm not standing for it. Me drive you to crime and you running in double harness with the Magain gang? What in thunder are you doing in that company? What are you doing listening at the window of June Royal's shack? What the crimson blazes are you doing in Cedar Falls at all? Eh! Answer me!"

The dance girl looked at him through eyes that were dim with the tears of misery.

"I—I wanted to see Miss Royal," she stammered.

"You lie!"

"Oh, I did—I did!"

"Yeh! That's why you came tailing in behind the Magain bunch. That's why I collared you standing on a water-butt makin' less noise than a chicken in an unlaid egg. Does Miss Royal usually see visitors that way? Look here, my gal—I'll give you your chance to get out of this business while the door's still open. You'll clear out of Cedar Falls to-night, understand? The gang has gone north. You'll go south, east, or west—I don't give a tinker's cuss which. But if you cross my trail again, I'll put you where you won't be able to make trouble for seven years. Get that? Miss Royal and old Daddy Bonard have worked like maniacs to pull that man through, to do the right thing by everybody concerned, and do you think I'm going to let a polecat like you upset the whole shooting-match just when things are panning out right? Gee, gal, I'll pull your throat out first!"

Nell o' the Dance Halls collapsed on the sodden turf.

"Please. I wasn't doing any harm," she moaned. "And I'm not one of the Magain gang. If you send me out of Cedar Falls, where can I go, what can I do?"

"You don't want me to tell you," retorted Norvice harshly. "You chose your own profession long enough ago to be able to choose your own pitch. This much I will tell you. I'll hound you out of every camp in the Territories rather than have you link up with the Magain gang again. You sleep on that."

He put out his hands and pulled her up to her feet. "You want to reserve that 'helpless, hopeless misery' stunt for the delectation of half-tipsy miners down at Dawson," he growled. "They fall for it when they get a bit maud-

lin. Pity is akin to insanity in this line of business—and I don't intend going mad for quite a while yet. My advice about a female who would turn renegade on a sick man and an angel like June Royal is—shoot her!" He wheeled her round and pushed her away. "Dawson lies away along there," he said. "Walk!—and keep on walking!"

He watched her slim, forlorn figure stumble away down the dark trail. For some minutes he stared after her, then he wheeled and flung his cheroot savagely into the bracken. "Ain't it—ain't it just plain hell when—when they're pretty!" he growled and he was snarling at himself when he said it.

He walked slowly back to June Royal's shack. There was a confused mutter of voices inside, all of them talking together. He knocked and entered, noting with an amused grin that, although the Sitka apparently never so much as moved an inch, in the flicker of an eyelid a cold steel rim glared unblinkingly at him from under the Indian's left armpit.

Endersley on the bunk laughed aloud. "All right, Charley," he said. And the Indian, screwing his head round, unconcernedly stuck his gun back inside his coat and continued his conversation.

Norvice glanced around with a look of genuine satisfaction lighting his eyes. There was joy and animation on every face, a lightness and a gaiety in the atmosphere that had been absent for long weary weeks. Pierre Bonard, with his finger-tips pressed together in an attitude of benign delight, beamed expansively on all around; June Royal, leaning against him with an arm on his shoulder, was picking imaginary specks off his cape in that delight-

ful way women have, her face radiating the joy that comes with the knowledge of a tremendous task splendidly accomplished. Endersley himself, lying back on the pillows, his eyes ablaze with the full, fresh remembrance of thrilling details and adventures crowding back on him, talking eagerly to the Indian of things done and difficulties overcome on the trail that led back through his lost year; and even Sitka Charley, the Imperturbable, squatting on his stool by the stove, his dogged old head nodding in vigorous assent as Endersley called up yet other dramatic fragments from the past.

Norvice stood and smiled at the cheerful group.

"Good-evening, Mr. Endersley," he said. "It looks as though I'm in time to congratulate you on a real comeback. Judging by your looks, you have got all the back numbers filed and fixed! I sincerely trust so!"

"Never felt kinder or more pleased in my life, Sergeant. It's always a sign of complete satisfaction when a man feels generous, isn't it? I feel so generous right now that I'd give you supreme command of all the Mounted Forces in the North if it was mine to give. I'd like you to have the moon, too, Sergeant, if you think you'd care to have it. The Padre here has just refused a free gift of the entire length of the Yukon and Miss Royal has turned down my honest offer to sit up all night and write poems about her. Miles of poems I want to write, Sergeant, full of delicious words and beautiful shining phrases. But she says she'd rather have her cabin back. There's Romance!—kicked right in its poor little stomach. And when I try to tell her a little of one per cent of what I'm duty bound to tell her, she swears I'm getting hot and hysterical again and

plugs me up with cod-liver oil and thermometers. What do you know about that?''

The Mounted man rubbed his hands with genuine pleasure. ''Delighted to hear you are so well and breezy. It's a dead sure sign a man is on the mend when he starts crackin' jokes about things that don't matter. You'll be pleased to know that the Magain crush is now busy as beavers in spring, persuading corns on their feet and working the alcohol out of their systems. I'd say they are a couple of miles on the road to ravin' madness by now. Gee! I guess the atmosphere itself will turn a bit carbolicky when those swabs find out what's hit 'em. They'll feel like the poor boob who held the baby while its ma went on a hurry call to the chemist—via Singapore, Bombay, and Honolulu. Shouldn't be surprised if they don't get so het up with joy and jubilation that they gently perforate each other to celebrate the calamity. Which would be a great pity.''

''Gosh, won't they be mad!'' June Royal was hugging herself with joy, mentally picturing the scene when the gang arrived at Nahoni Pass. ''Oh, wouldn't I like to be there!''

''Oh, my dear!'' said Pierre Bonard in a gentle tone of shocked rebuke. ''Such sentiments, and from you, too! Tut, tut.''

''That's right, Papa,'' agreed the Mounted man grimly. ''Never kick a man when he's down—unless he's still got life in him.''

''Charley tells me I have to thank you for that wheeze,'' said Endersley from the bunk.

''That Indian was never any great shakes on veracity,'' declared Norvice. ''I only suggested that he put up a

bluff. The idea was his—though I allow he was all for shooting the whole boiling of 'em through the door. Anyway, I'm almighty glad it worked. The whole bunch has cleared out, bag and baggage. Maybe you'll have time to get properly on your feet and up to your location before they realize they've been presented with the buck. That is, of course, presuming that you know where your location is. I understand that Charley turned the trick for you?"

"Yes, sure. He gave me an awful fright with his first yarn, though. I thought my memory had gone for good when I couldn't get a handhold on it anywhere. But then, when he started coughing up the real stuff, why, boy, it all came flying back so fast I found myself racing ahead of him. The giddy part of it is that our strike isn't up north at all, it's over at—"

"Don't tell *me!*" Norvice had wheeled on him like an angry woman. The old fierce austerity, the old masterful air of command was sticking out all over him. He bristled. He shot the words out of his mouth as though he had a spite against them.

"Eh?"

"I said don't tell *me!*" Norvice thumped the table. "I don't want to know where your gold is. The specimens I've been keeping for you are quite enough. They've nearly driven me mad. I hate the sight of 'em. Another week with 'em in my desk and I'd have fired myself out of the Mounted and gone skyrocketing off in chase of the rest. The man isn't made who can sleep in the same bed with a million every night of his life—and keep on kicking it out on the floor. No, sir, you keep it to yourself or you'll wake up one morning to find Ralph Norvice, a

stampeding kit, and a gold pan numbered among the Where-Are-Theys. With your leave I'll get along down to the Post and send your stuff up here; you can look after it yourself all right now, I guess. You'll excuse me hurrying off, won't you—I've left old Josh Henderson doing sentry-go over my office, while I came up to—to—er—see about things in general. Good-night, Miss Royal; good-night, folks."

"Hell of a man that!" said Endersley to himself as the door clicked behind the fine figure in the flaming scarlet tunic.

Thoroughly well pleased with the events of the day Norvice hurried down to the Police Post. Through the clumpy cedars he could faintly see the windows of his office, the lower panes painted over with the official vermillion and the gilt letters of his stalwart calling. Mentally he wondered why Henderson had turned the lamp out. Certainly there was no murky splash of yellow light streaming out through the upper window. Getting closer, he saw that one of the lower panes was broken from the inside.

He pushed open the door and went in. Inside, the silence was as profound as the darkness.

"Where are you, Josh; anything wrong?" he called softly. There was no answer. Just a plain blank silence so intense that it seemed to rear up all round him like something that could almost be touched. He drew a match sharply across the sole of his boot and held it over his head. It fizzed and flared up, its bright yellow flame lighting up the ramshackle office. The sight he saw flicked the satisfaction out of his soul as completely as the flaring sulphur-top had abolished the darkness.

Josh Henderson was lying on his face, with his head in a pool of his own blood, an ugly-looking gash behind his temple. The chair and the rough-cut table had been knocked flying and the paraffin lamp was smashed. Flung in a corner, smashed and broken and as empty as the day it left the factory, was the strong-box that only half an hour before had held the Endersley Dossier and thirteen fat lumps of nugget gold.

The match flared up and poured its light on the scene. It shone full on the three repulsive faces leering out of the photograph on the wall. The gibe in their lewd eyes seemed to be directed personally at him, and there was something of a challenge lurking in the depths of their contempt. Then the match went out.

In the black darkness Norvice's voice cut like the crack of a whip, savage and bitter.

"You wanton hag! I'll break your back for this. I'll—I'll—" Norvice became inarticulate.

The rage and mortification that drenched and burned his soul dried up his speech wells. In his heart was all the chagrin and the fury of a woman-hater held up to scorn and ridicule by one of the least of her sex. He stood with the spent match still held between finger and thumb—glaring at the composite picture on the wall. His fierce relentless pride had suddenly been torn and rawed to shreds, and his blazing anger centred on the woman. In his mind's eye he pictured himself having to make the humiliating confession to Robert Endersley—and probably to that cold-eyed Indian, too—that he had been diddled and brazenly hoodwinked by a woman, a saloon-woman, after he had succeeded in clearing every other possible enemy out of Cedar Falls. He saw himself, white-faced

and thin-lipped, admitting to his friends that he had let them down: he who above any other individual on the Klondike was to be relied upon to hand over his trust intact. The intrinsic value of the stuff stolen, running into thousands of dollars though it did, was a mere flea-bite compared with the wealth its owners would soon be tapping, but even that wealth was only a pinprick compared with the terrific shock Norvice's pride had sustained.

He poured some paraffin into an open tin and put a match to it. The paraffin burned with an exaggerated flicker that seemed almost as though a lamp was being violently turned up and down. It precipitated a constant and rapid succession of lights and darknesses in the disordered office, making jet-black shadows leap and jump across the walls.

In that ghostly, intermittent light Norvice pulled his gun and with cold deliberation put three bullets into the picture on the wall. Each ball took one of the faces clean between the eyes, with not an eighth of an inch difference between either of them. Then, to blazon and hall-mark his intention in the eyes of all men, he wrote under the picture, "I, Ralph Norvice, did this." It was the blunt, public vow of a man who would either redeem it—or quit the Mounted with the jeers of the multitude ringing in his ears.

He stood back and surveyed the picture, his teeth grinding together with rage.

"You hounds!" he rasped. "I'll do all that to you, and more. I'll see the three of you swinging up side by side as level as you are on that wall! Aye, and I'll promise you a fourth one to keep you company. That renegade hag of yours shall dangle with you!"

In the erratic light of the tin Vesuvius, he turned his attention to the man on the floor. Josh was completely knocked out of time; there was a gash in his head that would take weeks to heal and would always leave its mark. He propped him up against the overturned table, and stanched the bleeding, binding up the wound with his silk neckerchief. It was some minutes before he came to and Norvice was impatient, itching to get out after Nell o' the Dance Halls.

Josh opened his eyes and looked blankly for a moment at the Mounted man.

"Feel better?" asked Norvice. "Got a nasty crack on the head, but nothing to write epitaphs about."

Henderson blinked. "For the love of Mike, keep that darned candle steady," he growled. "Gosh, my head's ringin' like a 'lectric bell!"

"Shouldn't be surprised either," returned Norvice. "It looks as though you got a wallop from a pistol butt—only Nell don't carry a gun."

"Whassay?" Henderson was still a bit dopey.

"I reckon you've only got what you asked for. You must have been daft to let a dance girl catch you on the hop like that."

Henderson sat up. "A *who?* Dance gal? You're drunk, man. It wasn't no dancin' slut who landed me this packet—it was Coldwater Griff. He . . ."

*"Wha-at?"* Norvice jumped as though he had been stung.

"Yeh! I was standing with my back to the door, stoopin' over the table a-telling those gold-nuggets what I'd do to 'em if they was mine. You hadn't been gone five minutes. I hear da hissin' behind me, and when I

heaved round there was Coldwater Griff glarin' at me less'n a yard away. I'd left my gun at the Come Inside, like the gosh-wollickin' fool I am, and before I could holler out blue murder, he sloshed me with the grip of his gun. 'Strewth! A clap of thunder jazzed about in my head and turned to a big black cloud with lumps of painful lightning stabbin' about in it. I . . ."

"Yes, yes, but which way did he go?" Norvice's nerves were on edge.

Henderson regarded him with a look of sour pity.

"I didn't stop to notice; at that moment I was standing on my darned head!" he said witheringly.

"Aw, cut out that fancy stuff. That skunk has bolted with those nuggets!"

"You don't say! I'd have thought he just called with the milk."

"Was the woman with him?"

"No."

"And you're sure it *was* Coldwater Griff?"

"If there's a lump on my head, yes!"

Norvice looked down at him with a worried frown on his face. "Funny—damn funny," he said.

"Yes, like hell it is. I could laugh my head off." Josh was still profoundly grieved to think that he had received that fearful smack on the head, instead of the rightful tenant of the office.

He looked up at Norvice. "Half an hour ago you said that somebody was going to be unlucky about those thirteen nuggets, didn't you?" he said.

"I did," answered Norvice, screwing his head round sullenly at the defaced picture.

"Well, I'm him!" said Henderson, tenderly rubbing

his head. "And I'll trouble you to give me a helping hand down to my place. I—I want a brandy."

Norvice thought hard for a minute. The fact that Griff was still hanging around was a staggerer. It argued that the others couldn't be very far away; bullies of their type stick closer together than shark company directors. And it also argued that they mistrusted the yarn they had overheard the Indian telling. That, probably, was why they had left the dance woman behind to play eavesdropper. The chances were a hundred to one that she had already got into communication with them. She might even have told them the true location of Endersley's gold strike. The least she could have done was to tell them that Sitka Charley had bluffed them the first time. The more he thought about it, the less he liked it.

He tapped the injured man on the shoulder. "You lay there for a bit, old-timer," he said. "I've got to run up and see Endersley in a hurry. I'll send a couple of the boys along to give you a hand, but in case Coldwater *should* happen to pay you a return visit, I'll leave you my gun." He laid his big Colt automatic close handy to Henderson's right hand. "Plug him between the eyes," he advised, "and give him the whole chamber if you're in doubt about hitting him. In any case, I won't be more than ten minutes. I've got an uncomfortable hunch that the whole gang may be waiting for Cedar Falls to go to sleep, to make a raid on the Endersley end. Anyway, things are looking none too rosy. That perishin' dance girl knows where the gold strike is; and it looks as though it is going to develop into a race to the place—with Endersley still unable to travel, and Indians not allowed by law to peg ground. It doesn't look any too healthy, does it?"

Henderson agreed emphatically that the outlook at that particular moment was extremely headachy.

Norvice went over to the door to open it.

"G'night, Josh," he said, and lugged at the door.

But the door wouldn't open. He pushed it and barged at it with his shoulder, but something unusually heavy seemed to be barring it. It was one of those heavily built split-log doors with a swinging bar that fitted into sockets, both inside and out.

He stood back and flung himself at it with all his strength, but the door didn't budge an inch.

"What's up now?" demanded Henderson testily.

"The perishin' outside bar has swung: the door's wedged. Awkward—very. Whoever it was built this house contravened the laws of common-sense. He didn't even make windows big enough for a baby to wriggle through. It looks as though we shall have to make a row to be heard—"

Norvice continued talking, though he hadn't the haziest notion of what he was saying. His brain was working at lightning speed. Out of the corner of his eye he had caught a faint glimmer—a scarce perceptible movement at the broken window. He flattened himself against the wall and cursed himself for a fool. He made frantic gestures to the man on the floor to throw him his gun. Henderson was unsighted to the window and couldn't see anything of what was happening except a maudlin-voiced Sergeant of the Mounted, who had apparently gone stark, staring mad. The saloon-keeper looked at him for a moment in dumb surprise.

Slowly and without a sound a bronzed hand came in at the window. Gripped in its knotted fingers was a heavy

automatic with a barrel a foot long. The leaping flames of the paraffin tin played blue and green along its shining steel. For the flash of a second, Norvice saw the eye behind it, cold, forbidding, peering in through the broken glass—the eye of Coldwater Griff.

Norvice stood motionless against the wall. Henderson stared at him fatuously, jerked irritable questions at him as fast as he could get them off his tongue. The hand at the window came to rest on one of the iron bars and took deliberate aim at something inside the room.

Henderson's string of interrogations snapped off with a panicky jerk as there came a brilliant flash and a most appalling crash from just behind and above his ear. The tin Vesuvius erupted. It jumped an inch and two round holes stabbed into it in a direct line with the hole in the window. The paraffin drained out in a second and spread in a blazing stream across the floor.

"What the—" Henderson's astonished exclamation fizzled out as he made a wild wriggle to avoid the flaming oil which expanded in an ever-widening pool across the dry flooring. Norvice jumped in and kicked the wooden furniture clear, but one leg of the table was already burning, and the floor planks crackling ominously. He pulled off his tunic and used it as a flail to flog the flames out, but the paraffin was too volatile and in a few seconds his coat was burning too.

He grabbed his gun and leaped over to the window. But Coldwater Griff had gone. Norvice could hear the faint sounds of his running feet as he raced away toward the safe cover of the Bluffs.

Henderson staggered up to his feet, awake temporarily

to the fact that there are worse things on land than sore heads.

"Quick," said Norvice; "give me a hand to move this desk. This place will be an inferno in a couple of minutes."

A big clumsily built desk, in reality it was the Council Bench, stood in the corner against the wall and between them they pulled and tugged at it till it was clear. In the floor where it had stood was a large stone block, square and hinged. At the outer edges a steel ring was fixed in a swivel socket.

Norvice took a stance that straddled the stone. He seized the steel grip and heaved till the veins stood out like cords about his forehead. Henderson smashed off a table leg and used it as a lever. By the time they got the slab up, the walls were burning and the air was like a back-draught off a blast furnace. The pitch-pine was cracking and snapping like pistol shots and the smoke in the room was yellow as fog and a hundred times more acrid.

From the slab, a half-dozen ill-fashioned earth steps led downward. Norvice pushed the saloon-keeper and then jumped in after him, pulling the great slab down behind him.

After the blazing heat of the office above, the air down below struck freezingly cold and smelled of cold earth, mixed with that strange, indefinable scent, a mixture of hay and mice and old dusty volumes that connotes a room or a cellar that has not been opened for months.

Henderson mopped his forehead in the darkness. "Phew!" he said. "Shouldn't be surprised if this isn't our home address for the next hour or so. Very thoughtful little place to have about the house."

Norvice sat on the earth step and panted. His eyes were streaming, and he was breathing like a ridden horse. "This—this is the sulphuric limit!" he panted. "Every blessed thing seems to have gone flying off the handle to-night. Strike a match, will you? There's a candle in a bottle over there somewhere."

There came the rough scrape of a sulphur-top and a spurt of flame. Henderson peered around and found and lit the candle. There were others on a ledge and he began lighting a couple more, but the Mounted man's irritable voice stopped him.

"One's enough," he said. "There's no air outlet down here, and we may be cooped up here for hours. Let's hope that shack up top burns out quickly. If the boys start trying to put it out with water buckets, they'll only prolong the agony. The air down here will get too hot to breathe. And nobody up there knows about this calaboose."

"Thanks very much! I always did like mine without water. The next time I got a block of news to tell you, I'll send it round by the head waiter I haven't got."

The saloon-keeper inspected his sanctuary. It was a roughly dug cellar about fifteen feet square by about eight deep. The steps leading down from the trapdoor were so rude as to be almost a slipway. In one corner was a bench with some blankets on it, and a small keg of water underneath. In the other corner was a big box full of official documents and Police Returns for the neighbourhood. The ledge on which the candle burned was scooped out of the raw earth. With those exceptions the place was just a bare dug-out.

"Looks like a morgue and smells like a morgue. With

a bit of bad luck it'll *be* a morgue." Josh Henderson delivered his judgment and sat down on the step next to Norvice. "How come yeh find it?" he demanded.

"Had it dug four seasons back. There was a crowd of Indians on the River making a big lumber drive, and they kicked up a heap of trouble. Mad drunk every night, fighting, knifing, making no end of a stink. So I had this place dug out for 'em. They were safe down here. Couldn't knife anybody and they had yards of leisure to work off the hooch. I've used it since for the local archives; that's 'em over there."

"Very thoughtful." He stood up and put his hand under the great stone slab. It was blisteringly hot and all the pleasant chill had gone off the air. Overhead they could hear the crackling roar of the resinous logs taking fire. Once there came a terrific crash and the roaring increased tenfold.

"That's the roof fell in," observed Henderson. " 'S a funny thing: I remember when I left home my old mammy said to me, 'Josh,' she said, 'you'll be sorry you ever went North. You mark my words,' she said, 'by the time Alaska has done with you, you'll wish you had went South.' "

The stone slab began to glow red with the ferocity of the raging stacks of fire heaped upon it.

Henderson went over and blew the candle out. "Central heating is good enough for mine," he declared.

Norvice looked at him through eyes red-dimmed with the smoke.

"Josh," he said, "you're a tough old bird—but—but ain't this hell!"

"Comfortably warm, Sarn't, comfortably warm. I'll

be getting more like what you said, a bit later on. But I get your drift. You mean about Endersley?''

''Yes. You can bet your boots that every man jack in Cedar Falls is gathered around up topsides. I'll bet that even old Pierre and the Sitka have come down to watch the Police Post go up in smoke. Maybe they're running a sweepstake on how long she'll burn. Do you get me?''

''Aye!''

''It means that Endersley and June Royal will be helpless and unarmed in that isolated cabin—with every other soul in Cedar Falls down here at the fire, rubber-necking around as unconcerned as though it was just a rate-fed public entertainment. And there's the Magain gang and all their murderous dishwashers round the corner waiting to jump in on 'em. Hell! This trick goes to Magain all right.''

''There's one thing,'' observed Henderson placidly. ''Miss June don't give a brass button for any of 'em.''

''Maybe,'' retorted Norvice bitterly; ''but there's only one argument holds any weight with Magain—that that appears as slight bulge on the right hip. And I know for a fact that there ain't a gun in her shack.''

## CHAPTER IV

JUNE ROYAL looked at her watch and frowned severely.

Robert Endersley was interested in that frown. He would never have believed that a girl's face, so dainty and infinitely adorable in repose, so deliciously alluring in laughter, could yet take on an added note of witchery. Yet when those delightful, wicked little puckers came crinkling into her face, he had to admit to himself, which he did quite unblushingly, that his heart did very well, indeed, only to miss three beats in five.

"Mr. Endersley, it's high time you went to sleep," she declared in a tone that brooked neither denial nor argument.

The man who had struck it rich feigned an accommodating touch of deafness. He lay on the bunk talking earnestly to Sitka Charley, who, stolid and impassive as ever, sat on a stool beside the stove talking over plans for getting up to their new strike.

"It was fortunate—and yet it was unfortunate that you wrote no claim paper when you found gold," commented the Indian. "Had you done so, Magain would surely have taken it from you on the floor of the Come Inside. Had you give it to me, Magain would surely have taken it from me when he got me alone in his cabin up there among the Falls."

"M'm—sure!" said Endersley.

"Yet it is unfortunate. For now we ourselves must make that journey again. We were far gone when we

found that gold; so far gone that your fingers could not write down the words according to the demands of the Law; so far gone that we did not even stop to drive our claim pegs. In a little while will come the snow. Before the clouds begin to empty themselves upon the land, we must be out on trail. Our way is far way, and you will need much strength. As the trail whitens with the coming of the snows, so shall we shake off those who would get in before us. We will head north, but with the falling of the snow we will turn to the westward, following the line of the great river till the Territories are left behind and we stand in Alaska. The whiteness will cover our trail, blotting it out day by day. So shall we leave no trail for those who follow. Does this sound well in your ears?"

"M'm—sure. But there's one thing I'm worrying about a goodish deal—"

"Mr. Endersley—will you please go to sleep?"

"And that's about dogs. Now, I take it we shall want at least ten, a full team and a big outfit. There's the rub, as the ointment booster would say. I'm flat broke, as broke as the river-ice in spring."

"Mr. Endersley! Will-you-please-turn-over-and-go-to *sleep?*"

Sitka Charley scratched his head. "You're not broke," he said. "Nor-vis still has the specimens. They are more than enough for our needs. I will arrange those matters. I will get the gold from him, and I will buy dogs and grub and outfit."

The Indian ceased speaking. He did so because he couldn't help himself. June Royal had taken him by the ear and was gently leading him toward the door. It was very unusual, almost amazing; he didn't know what to

make of it. White squaws seemed to exercise prerogatives and powers over their menfolk to a degree unheard of in the lodges of his own people.

"Good-night, Charley," she said, patting him on the shoulder. "You've been perfectly splendid to-day; splendid to-day and always. One day, when that wicked person on the bunk is too far away to hear what I say, I will tell you how much I love you for all you have done. But you really must go now. You can discuss all those details to-morrow—come in and have breakfast here, if you like. But my patient *must* go to sleep. He has had an exhausting day. Considering his weak state, he has had far too much excitement to be good for him. Please say good-night and leave him alone."

Sitka Charley paused at the door. In all the whole ramification of his mental code he only admitted to one Boss, and the Indian looked round at him, puzzled. In his eyes there was an unasked question. Was this sort of thing quite *à la mode,* quite according to the white man's usual conception of the privileges and status of woman? If it was so, well and good; if not, Endersley had only to say the word and Charley would pick her up, shove her in the water-butt, and come back and finish off the conversation.

"Shall I go?" he asked placidly.

"M'm—sure!" said Endersley. "Always do as you're told by a woman—'specially that one. Personally I'd never dream of disobeying her. She's a trifle autocratic at times, I admit, but she has probably been a schoolmarm in her time, so that a certain austerity of manner is to be expected. Yes, sure, you go, Charley. You'll make it easier for me. If you don't, she will give me such a thin

time, my life will feel like one long safety-razor blade. Maybe she will decide to bath me! Awful! G'night, old scout—see you when the ducks cackle."

Sitka Charley was not listening: he did not even see the violent blush that suddenly whizzed into June Royal's face. He was gazing, with a long sight, down through the avenue of shacks and timber clumps to the Police Post, where a light in the Police Office window bobbed and blinked like an erratic spark in the night. There was nothing more than that, an intermittent flickering and winking of a faint speck of light at the far end of the timber frescade.

He watched it in silence, intently. He couldn't understand it: it was unusual. His experience of the North was the product of many savage lessons learned on the spot, not the least of which was "when you encounter the unusual, either beware of it or investigate it." And Sitka Charley's was a single-track mind; dour and grim and devilishly dogged, but still, single-track.

"*Now,* sir, will you go to sleep!" June Royal stood by the recalcitrant, her hands on her hips, an imperious command in her attitude.

"Yes, ma'am!" replied Endersley in a small obedient voice. He pulled the blankets high up over his head. "Not only will I go to sleep, but, if it would give your highness one tiny morsel of satisfaction, I will promise never to wake up again: I will climb up to the stars and pick them for you one by one. I will convert the whole of Alaska into a hothouse, growing roses for you to walk on. I will give you Australia for a week-end bungalow island. I will have the Pacific bottled and brought up

here for you to keep goldfish in—it 'ud kill 'em stone dead, but still, it should be done. I'd scrape the sky—''

"If you don't go to sleep immediately, you ungrateful, graceless, exasperating, good-for-nothing, disreputable, uncivilized hobo you, I'll—I'll get a chair and I'll sit up all night and have no sleep at all.''

"Phew: what a flow!'' muttered that adjectived individual, closing his eyes.

June Royal looked round for Charley. But he was gone. The gentleman with the single-track mind had come to the conclusion that the mysterious light that bobbed and blinked like a spark on the edge of the night was a touch of the unusual that demanded investigation.

Before he had gone twenty yards the fantastic flickering ceased. It steadied for one long second and then grew slowly to a bright red light that increased in magnitude and brilliance every moment. It took on a bright orange glow. A smoke ball puffed out above it and began to spread. A burly figure, black on the darkness of the night, detached itself from the wall of the silent building and raced for the Bluffs. Sitka Charley began to run.

By the time he got to the scene the Police Post was a roaring cube of flame, tall, red, noisy flame that streamed up into the night and sent up a high, straight column of smoke coiling toward the stars. Men were running in from all directions. Hunters, miners, trappers, fur agents, voyageurs, Indians—they all came pouring down from their cabins and houses till the whole permanent population of Cedar Falls was gathered round gazing at the holocaust.

Sitka Charley walked round the burning building. The glass windows of the Police Office shivered to fragments

in the heat and fell. Through the iron bars he could see into the room, a yellow furnace of fire that hurt the eyes with the intensity of its glaring, and blotted out all else.

"Anybody in there?" A dozen people asked the question and a dozen dubious heads shook in answer.

"Shouldn't think so. Wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance if there was. We couldn't do anything; they'd be dead by now, anyway."

"How'd it happen?"

"Lord knows. Candle knocked over, or smoulderin' 'baccy, or somethin' like that, I shouldn't wonder. Gee! Look how them logs blaze! Reckon there must be about a ton of resin spittin' and roarin' in that wood—and turpentine by the gallon. Looks as though the Sergeant will be buildin' hisself new quarters."

"Wonder where he is?"

"Heard tell he was trailin' a clue on the Magain crowd. He sent for a posse of troopers in a hurry from Dawson. Maybe they'll be along in time to start cuttin' timber for their new mansion."

Sitka Charley paused in front of the door. The swing-bar was clamped into its sockets, tightly, on the outside. He noted it, his single-track mind registered the observation and dismissed it—the bar was always clamped on the outside when the Government men left the building. Then the roof crashed in. A golden shower of sparks and splinters went flying upward, swirling and scurrying on the heated air; and a sudden, abrupt mushroom of smoke spread out above the building on the uprush of air. The falling roof had a devastating effect on the remainder of the building. The pressure and concussion of its demolition sent the door-wall tottering: it swayed, sagged

and fell, outward, in a secondary inferno of pyrotechnic ferocity. The blazing logs rolled ponderously across the ground, smashed from their mortising. But the door, burning fiercely, fell intact. Sitka Charley looked at it. The inside bar was tight clamped in its socket too. Flat on the ground it lay, a slab of fire, clamped across by the two red-hot bars of iron. The Indian noted that too. Because his was a single-track mind, he recalled the fact of the outside bar being wedged; he remembered the barred window, the unusualness of the cumulation of incidents, and the hand in his coat pocket automatically disengaged the safety catch of his gun.

Then another question went flickering round the crowd.

"Where's Henderson? Anybody seen Josh? Where is he—anybody seen him?"

A lightning census showed that the boss of the Come Inside was missing.

"He can't be far away," said Masterson emphatically. "He was over at his saloon less'n an hour back: left in a hurry to come over and see Norvice. He closed up his bar and came over right away."

"Wanted to see Norvice, did he? Then probably it was somethin' to do with that Magain clue. Say, where's that Indian—maybe he can give us a line on this?"

They found him. He was stooping down critically examining one of the fallen wall logs. Gummed on its rounded surface was part of a picture, scorched and blackened. It was scarcely decipherable. But the fact that pinned his attention, searchingly and urgently, to that smoking beam was the appearance of three bullet holes, each one plumb between the eyes of the likeness portrayed. There was some writing under it, bold block

capitals that barely showed against the blackness of the tattered parchment.

The Indian was illiterate according to white conceptions of education. He could read any and every sign that Nature cared to write, understood the complete and bewildering languages as written by the animals, the elements, and the green things growing in vale and wood: but the twenty-six simple hieroglyphics of the white man's vocabulary defied and eluded him. The crowd gathered round peering at it. Masterson went down on his hands and knees, fanning away the eye-stinging smoke with his hat. After a moment he spelled out the words. "I, Ralph Norvice, did this."

Masterson leapt to his feet. "Boys, quick, batterin' rams!" he yelled. "There's somethin' doin' in there that's fishier than a bar'l of salt cod."

Sixty men, working on the singing bowstring of high excitement, can accomplish a great deal in a hurry. In two minutes axes were ringing on the night air. In four minutes half a dozen tall pine trees swayed down to the earth and were being denuded of branches. In six minutes as many demolition gangs were smashing and pulverizing the fire into a flat and scattered mass of smoking woodwork. The rams bashed and thundered on the walls, the corner posts splintered and fell, and the walls caved in. The Police Post fell in a raging white-hot torrent of pinewood fireworks. Cedar Falls, now turned salvage corps *en bloc,* used their pine trees for giant pokers. They scrambled the fire, broke it up, decimated it, disintegrated it. Then they "reversed arms," dragging the tree branches backward and forward across the blackened ruins. The fire wasn't exactly put out; it was demolished

—hammered out. It spat and glowed desultorily in a thousand isolated spots over an area of a hundred yards square. Among the débris Masterson found the badge and buttons of a "Canadian Mounted" coat; a trapper found a pistol, red-hot and with the bullets exploded in the magazine. But perhaps the most interesting item of all was passed over with a kick. It was a tin with a couple of round bullet holes in it near the bottom; and there was a sticky residue of burnt oil in it. Because his was a single-track mind entirely and absolutely, Sitka Charley picked it up.

Then somebody found a red-hot stone slab, a thousand times too hot to touch; his badly blistered hands taught him his own foolishness.

"Gosh-darn!" he growled, dancing round. "How long have the Mounted been allowed privit wine cellars."

"Now, I'll allow that's very curious," said Masterson, frowning down at it. "I've known Norvice long enough to know this place inside out, but darned if I knew his office had two floors to it. Hey, Charley, did you know anything about this?"

But Charley did not answer. Charley was not there. If the night had not been so confoundedly dark they might have seen the gentleman with the single-track mind flying up the avenue of cedars toward June Royal's shack as fast as his stumpy but surprisingly supple limbs would carry him.

# CHAPTER V

When June Royal looked round and found that Sitka Charley had gone at last, she breathed with relief. Endersley had been slowly working himself up to a dangerous pitch of excitement. It was restrained, held tightly on a leash, but she knew he might be all the worse for that. His eyes were bright, far too bright for a man convalescing from high fever, his cheeks were hot and bright with all the danger signals of a naturally ebullient spirit straining against enforced and galling quietude. She knew that his wild sallies into gay humour, bold and care-free though they were, were only the outcome of an eager, harassing desire to be out and about, taking a hand in the life and work going on around him.

Now that he knew the secrets of his lost year, now that he understood fully the difficulties and dangers of his discovery, he was a live wire of excitement, anxious to be on his feet again, fretful at having to lie on his back while others superintended the arrangement for the jump-off. His mind was a whirl of fragmentary facts and details, a riot of flashing remembrances and keen appreciations. He knew where his gold mine was; he knew the Magains were on his trail; he knew that Sitka Charley was doing his utmost for him; and he knew what a tremendous debt of gratitude he owed to June Royal and Pierre Bonard.

"Where is the Padre?" he asked, tossing uneasily on the bunk.

"He went down to the Mission. And Sitka Charley

has gone too. There's nothing now to worry about; just close your eyes and try to go to sleep. You've been overdoing it. First the unbandaging and then Charley coming in—it's been too much for any man just coming round from a bout of fever like you. Before you know where you are you'll be back in a raging delirium again. Please go to sleep!" She said the last sentence with a genuine plea in her voice. Now that the worst was over, she was dreading possible reactions.

"But I don't feel a bit like sleep, really I don't. I've been sleeping for the best part of a month and these blankets are hot as an oven. And my eyes ache too much for sleep. I feel like old Rip Van W. being told to lie down and have a little snooze five minutes after his big wake-up."

"Yes, but, please! Charley will be coming back to-morrow! You can talk to him till you are both blue in the face then. But you really must rest your brain."

"Well, where are you going to sleep, anyway?"

"Pierre has gone down to fix me up a shakedown at the Mission. You'll be all right. I shall lock the door and I've arranged with Norvice to look in during the night. After to-night he's posting a special guard here from sunset till dawn. He wanted to do it to-night, but he isn't expecting his troopers till the morning. So he's doing it himself for to-night. But in any case, I absolutely refuse to leave here until you are asleep. So if you want to be horribly unkind and keep me up all night, just keep on staying awake."

"All right, I'll try; but you give me a wicked choice. There's nothing I'd like better to do than to talk to you all night. Mrs. Grundy would have to be mounted on

ball-bearings so that she could turn in her grave as often as she wanted, but I expect she's done that often enough already. Open the door for a few minutes before you go, will you, please? I'm terribly hot."

June nodded. Endersley had five blankets on him besides a huge bear fur and the stove had been roaring away unusually hot all the evening.

She was halfway to the door when the apparition came. The latch clicked and the door swung open. For a moment she thought she was going to collapse in a heap. Coldwater Griff, a gun dangling by the trigger-guard from a bony forefinger, was leaning against the doorpost.

She felt the blood surge madly to her face and her heart began to pound like tiny drumbeats against her breast. She stood stock-still, frozen, a whole world of castles tumbling and crashing about her ears. She could hardly believe her senses; her eyes must surely be playing her some strange, horrible trick.

Coldwater Griff—why, she had watched him run from her shack, watched him go full tilt with the rest of the gang on their wild-goose chase up to the Nahoni Mountains, had seen him make through to the Bluffs and start climbing.

Yet there he stood, a leering, cynical smile playing loathsomely round the corners of his thick beastly lips. He dangled the gun, playfully, as though the fact of its being there, swinging on his finger, amused him vastly.

She turned her head, half-fearfully, toward the man on the bunk. Endersley, with his head buried among the pillows and half-turned to the wall, was still blissfully unconscious of the awful thing that had happened. She felt the blood drain from her face—to her it seemed as

though it had drained completely from her body. She was aware, all in a single fearful second, that she was helpless and powerless and absolutely at the outlaw's mercy. There was not a weapon in the place. Pierre Bonard and Sitka Charley were gone. Ralph Norvice would probably not be looking round till midnight at least, and she was alone in a lonely shack with an invalid who could not even stand on his feet. She went numb with horror. White-faced and wild-eyed she stood and gazed at the brute in the doorway.

Memories of the wild tales of the things accredited to him rocketed through her brain. She knew him as a brute only one shade less black than Magain himself, who had once shot a Koyukuk squaw's baby because its puling irritated him. Griff had never shot a child—he vaunted the fact boastfully as a proof of his genteel disposition, bragged of it amongst the rest of the gang as an irrefutable proof that they were lower down the scale than he. But he had shot a woman, shot her in the gin-bar down at Broken River. He shot her because she knocked his whiskey over when she bumped against his table. And then he had to shoot her dancing partner, too, because that dancing partner was fool enough to shove his hand where most men keep a gun.

And once he had insisted on fighting a man with a broken arm. In connection with that incident it should be noted that he held himself blameless. His righteous excuse was that he offered the man two alternatives, fight or be knifed. And the fool had chosen to fight—with his right arm in a sling. So Coldwater had nothing else to do but punch, and punch and pound and bash at his helpless face till that face was almost void of features.

And once he had driven a pair of horses over the Falls. Stolen them and got himself cornered by the Mounted up there in the Bluffs, and then, rather than see the horses returned to their owners, had driven them to the edge of the fearful drop and sent them plunging down the colossal terraces of roaring water and bone-crushing ledges. Whinnying with fright and big-eyed with terror, they were forced over the brink and he watched them go bumping and smashing down to their doom among the ledges in the eternal mists of the rushing outraces below.

There were a score of other wicked memories that flashed about in her head as she stared at the bloated ruffian responsible for them. There was something in his eyes, a vile horrible glare of lustful appreciation that petrified her. He was one of those unpleasant individuals whose mouths turn downward when they smile.

When first the apparition burst upon her, her thoughts flew to the man on the bunk. She thought this was but another effort on the part of the gang to get at Endersley, to shanghai him and force his secret from him. But each moment brought the deeper realization that Griff was almost unmindful of the man on the bunk. His cold, fishy eyes were fixed on her. They were sizing her up, noting every detail of her, gloating over every curve and line of her as evilly as a miser might gloat over his gold. It was she, June Royal, the beast wanted; his eyes were devouring her.

He grinned at her and advanced into the room, licking his lips. Knowing his unassailable strength, he thrust his gun away and held out his great arms to her. June Royal backed into the cabin with fright.

" 'S a durn nice welcome, ain't it," he said, throatily.

Under the hairy eyebrows his eyes began to smoulder with the red fires of resentment. "What are yeh takin' on airs and graces for, eh?" He stumbled against the hot stove and cursed angrily.

Endersley half sat up with a jerk, his face a mask of blank astonishment. Until that moment he had been pleasantly trying to woo sleep, perfectly unconscious of the drama unfolding in the doorway. He tried to get his knees to function, so that he could sit up and see what on earth was the matter, but muscles that had been denied action for over a month flatly refused to obey his urgent commands.

To him Coldwater Griff was only a name. To the best of his knowledge Coldwater Griff was miles away, swiping the miles with the rest of the gang heading up to the mythical Captains Three. This creature was an entirely new landmark in his life, an ugly-looking brute who seemed to know June Royal well enough to enter her shack at night and to address her in terms of insolent familiarity.

He was frankly puzzled, more so when he saw June Royal's despairing eyes hunting round the almost bare walls. All the comfort they yielded was a couple of old Indian fishing spears, rusted and frail hung over the doorway tantalizingly out of reach, a *shaman's* skin buckler, an old dog-whip—relic of the last owner of the cabin—a few tins and jars of flowers, two unframed German oleographs of English Royalty, and a cheap alarm clock hanging on a nail.

June backed against the wall and stood there, horrified, her hands pressed against the wood logs.

Griff hiccuped and spat in the fire. "Thought I was—hic—way up over the Bluffs, didn't yeh?" he growled

beerily. "Garn! You supercilious hussy, you; turnin' your nose up at a—hic—gen'lman. When I—hic—get ya' way out of here I'll—I'll tan all that darn cockiness outa yeh! Sure I will! I'll lay the whip over your skin till you'll love me well enough to lick my boots!"

He sat on the edge of the table, swinging his leg while he calmly surveyed her. To him, a woman was just a lower order of the human species sent down to earth with no other motive than to satisfy the passions of man, a chattel with no other object in life than to gratify any man's brute desires. Any woman who objected to such an assumption was taking on airs and graces, and required to be taught better manners; needed putting in her place and taught her proper sphere of life.

He took out his gun and dangled it on his finger again, the same gun that had knocked Josh Henderson senseless and fired the Police Post.

"This li'l' steel-eyed devil rules the roost," he announced, "and I'll trouble you to recognize his authority. Now, m'gal, you're coming longa me. Don't look like that at me, blast your eyes! Laugh, sing, show me how—hic—how pleased you are. My other gal, Nell, she left me—hic—the cat. Halfway up the Bluffs we was, and then, damme, if she—hic—didn't turn and slip me.

"So I came back for her. Bully says, 'Griff,' he says, 'we ain't going all the way up to the Toreadors without a woman,' he says. 'You go back an' git one. You git that proud-eyed gal that old Popey Bonard has tucked under his wing; we'll knock the swank out of her in about less time than it takes a drop of water to freeze in a cold snap,' he says. 'It strikes me Nell's gone soft; she don't fancy the long walk, an' all the cooking, an' et setra. If

you can collar 'er again, do so,' he says; 'she'll have to be learnt another lesson or two, but t'my mind, she's—hic—cleared. Failin' her, you go and grab June Royal.' I took a good squint around this magnificent City, and never—hic—set eyes on Nell, so I guess you've got the pleasure of next—hic—dance with us. If you wanna get yer furs an' sleepin'-bag, ye'd best hurry, 'cos I ain't over-anxious to hang around here longer'n necessary. But I'd advise you to make your pack as—hic—light as you like, 'cos you'll have to hump the damn thing yourself. Now, jump around some, you little devil.''

Endersley listened with growing astonishment. The cool audacity of it stunned him; his own infantile helplessness paralyzed him. Coldwater Griff completely ignored him. Once, certainly, he turned and regarded him, but there was such a look of savage, ferocious contempt snapping out of his eyes that it was obvious Griff was thoroughly aware of the sick man's helplessness.

''Hi you! Come on, jump around and get yourself ready,'' he roared. ''Skip around lively now, or I'll spit a bullet into your li'l' white faced babby there—maybe that'll help you!''

June Royal hadn't moved. Her cheeks, ashen pale, told of the access of horror that gripped her. The fearfulness of Griff's last threat almost hypnotized her: she felt herself sliding helplessly into a world of horror and dread from which there was no escape. Griff, with a long-barrelled gun swinging on his finger, stood over the exit to that world like a Satanic, cloven-hoofed monster of gigantic proportions.

With an effort that was more than a mere struggle of will power, she forced her eyes away from the hateful

mesmerism of Griff's animal gaze. For hope, for pity, for sanctuary, she looked across at the man for whose life she had fought for a whole wearying month. What she saw there sent a tiny message of a still tinier hope burning through her breast like a white-hot sword.

Endersley was staring at her, hot-eyed and white-lipped, making frantic gestures to her, pointing to the wall above her head. In his right hand was poised a bowl of flowers, star flowers that she herself had cut and laid above his head a few short hours before. The bowl was heavy and full of water and his gestures unmistakable; his eyes were simply thundering their message into her soul. His left hand crawled out toward a second bowl of flowers.

The frail straw of hope held out by Endersley was a turning-point. With a great thankfulness she saw that she was not fighting a lone hand against a brute who regarded murder as something less than a waste of a bullet; she was not entirely friendless and helpless. There were two of them. Endersley could not be expected to do much, but such as he was capable of doing he was ready and eager to do.

She nodded. A full bowl of star flowers whizzed across the room like a floral thunderbolt. It impacted with a ringing smack against the dangling gun and sent it spinning into the corner; a shower of damnably cold water and broken earthen-ware drenched the ruffian. Coincident with the smash of the bowl June jumped and snatched the dog-whip. The second bowl, streaking across at the bully like a catapulted stone gave her the chance to get the whip uncoiled. It took him flat in the face. June heard the horrid click of it as it smashed against his teeth, knocking him backward over the table.

With a scream of pain he swayed to his feet, mouthing a foul string of curses and profanity.

And then began one of the most amazing fights ever seen in the fighting North. Coldwater Griff, fighting alternately to get at his gun, or at June Royal's throat, and June Royal fighting to keep him off with vicious, stinging whip-play.

The whip was one of the usual type used by dog-runners in the North. A short, stocky handle a little over a foot long and a thin tenuous lash that could tickle a leader's flanks from twelve feet away. The thong was leather, but the switch-end was moose gut, ferociously penetrating. In that shack on the outskirts of Cedar Falls, June Royal taught Coldwater Griff that a dog-whip in the hands of an expert musher as she herself was, can be one of the most efficient weapons of offence and defence in the world. He made a wild grab with his hand outstretched for his gun. A stinging flick round his wrist and he went dancing halfway through the door, his flesh cut to the bone.

"You devil!" he howled and made a wild rush at her, but the whip clicked viciously four times in a single second, three times round his huge shoulders and once across the head. The weal jumped out on his forehead immediately, red and livid. He screamed and covered up; but the whip, cracking startlingly in the quiet cabin, snapped and bit at his ankles till he screamed again. She stood like a young angry Amazon, furious at the galling insults the desperado had heaped upon her, paying him back in terrific piecemeal for each insulting word, for each foul look and each brutal gibe. The whip sang and cracked like a continuous drumfire of musketry. It never rested. Hot and panting, she lashed at him as, crouching and blaspheming, he tried

to get in under the leaping thong and knock her senseless. He was whimpering with pain and drunken exasperation. Like the bully he was, he feared pain more than anything in the world—he who was so prodigal in giving pain and misery to others. He leaped in half-blind with passion, and fell headlong over the stool. A dozen times the merciless whip cracked at lightning speed round his arms, neck, legs, shoulders, and clutching hands. He yelled aloud in agony and began crawling on his hands and knees toward his gun in the corner.

Endersley had shot his bolt. The shock and the sudden demonical exertion of flinging the flower bowls had set up a chaotic twitching of muscles and tendons long since fallen into the coma of desuetude. He lay on his back, nerves and limbs twitching spasmodically, listening in a welter of hope and dread to the pistol cracks of the whizzing whipthong, croaking exultantly in his dry throat. "Soak him, lassie! Take the hide off him! Give him what he's given Nell, whoever she is; give him what he was going to give you! Sock into him, lassie; cut him up; pickle him! Gee! You're the greatest he-girl that ever breathed!"

The outlaw pulled his parka about him, tucked his head down, and crawled.

The girl was panting like a deer run to exhaustion. The bully had got his big idea. He screamed at her. "You darned vixen. I'll shoot you for this as sure as heck. And, by God! I'll shoot where you'll live for an hour before you finish off."

His gun was lying near the door and he was within a couple of yards of it. His hand sent out toward it. The lash played on it once, twice, thrice, as quick as light, as

quick as thought itself. Three spurts of blood splashed on the hand where the thong bit, but the hand went on. The outlaw had reached *his* turning-point: he was goaded beyond endurance. The ferocious, torturing agony of that inexorable whip had become its own narcotic, stupefying him past all caring. All he wanted was to get at that gun and to shoot her, to shoot her where she would linger for a few hours in as much shrieking agony as she was flailing upon him.

"Stop!" she panted. "Stop—or—I'll blind—you!"

Instinctively the ruffian paused.

"I will!" she went on impetuously. "If you—move—another—inch—I'll get you—right-clean-in-the-eyes!"

"To hell with you!" Griff shut his eyes tight and crawled on.

June whimpered a little and fell in a heap, the whip falling from her fingers. She moaned. "Oh, Bobby, Bobby, I can't—I can't! I can't blind a man!"

Coldwater Griff got within two inches of that gun. Then something happened to him, something sudden and unexpected, but so entirely forcible that Coldwater Griff was knocked back a yard. The thing that happened to him was a fist, a brown, thin, skinny fist to which was attached the most bewilderingly aggressive Indian he had ever encountered in his life.

To Charley's lasting credit it must be said that he neither fired nor used his gun. Whether it was the fact that his man was on his hands and knees and therefore helpless against gun-play—a moot point in any case—or whether he was so boiling over with blind fury at having been spoofed by Coldwater Griff, that the only way he could restore the upset balance of his universe was by a

raw knuckle rough-house that would give him the exquisite pleasure of feeling Griff's bloated nose thudding against his fists, is a matter that the Sitka himself dismisses with a shrug and non-committal spit at the stove. Certain it is, and beyond all possible doubt, that Coldwater Griff entered upon one of the most unsatisfactory fights of his life.

Charley swished in through the door and pitched into him like an agitated, irritated, aggravated polecat. Hot on the heels of the first terrific smack he planted a brace of make-weights. Coldwater Griff rolled over on the floor and stared at him as though unable to believe the evidence of his own senses.

Then fourteen stone ten reared up and sailed into eight stone nothing. All June Royal remembered of it was a most surprising flurry of arms and legs and snarling oaths, cut short by flying fists. A hundred times Griff slammed over terrible-looking smashes at the Sitka's head, and a hundred times they punched big eddies in the air. The Indian had an amazing faculty of swaying from the hips a fraction of a second after Griff had started one of his mighty head-crushers on its way. He swayed, ducked his bullet head as the blow came over, and then rammed it hard and solid into Griff's waist-line. Griff had never tried to fight a more elusive individual in his life. He hit with the blind, unreasoning fury of a maniac, swinging and hooking and jabbing and jolting at a target that persisted in evaporating an eighth of a second before the blow landed. Even his pet wallop, the famous skull-crusher, known and feared in a hundred whiskey joints along the Yukon, failed to connect, no matter how often he slammed it across.

Once he got his arms about the Indian; in a transport of overwhelming passion he flexed and flung his weight forward on the little man. The Indian's back bent like a bow-string when the arrow is ready to fly, but a moment later Griff was hopping round the cabin literally crying with pain. It is an indisputable fact that no man can stand a good solid kick on the shins, let alone the murrain of kicks which suddenly afflicted him from knee-caps to ankles.

Charley worked round to the fallen gun and kicked it across the floor toward June. The outlaw backed against the wall blear-eyed and puffy with the rain of blows that had been showered upon him. He tried to get a clearer sight of the human eel who couldn't be hit and yet could hit like a kicking mule.

He had never tried to fight a highly charged electric cable before, although he was absolutely certain he was doing so at the present moment. His head had been jolted nearly off his neck and his arms were lead heavy. The number of times he had struck at nothing more substantial than air had taken more vitality out of his biceps than if every one of his blows had landed on the Sitka's bony frame. And what was infinitely worse, his wind had gone to the dogs. He was wheezing like an asthmatic tree-puma when the snows are running for a fall. That exasperating head of the Indian had played havoc with him. He had tried his mightiest to keep him out; fist and knee and boot he had tried, but the moment he relaxed his guard bang went the head into his stomach again.

A raging recklessness blazed red in his eyes; his brute nature rebelled against the mad absurdity of a huge man like him being beaten by a handful of skin and bone like

Charley—first flogged by a chit of a girl and then beaten by a scrap of a man.

With a bellow of frenzy he whaled in at the Sitka again, snarling and mouthing like a rabid dog. Charley stepped back and battered away at the bull head as he came on, slugging away with the callous coldness of a hatred born of the feudal enmity of centuries. Four times he crossed his right over on the outlaw's massive jaw and twice he landed full on the point, but his weight was insufficient to force the knock-out.

Then Griff uttered a throaty bellow of relief and victory. June Royal screamed and made a jump at the gun on the floor, but she was too late. Through the open door rushed two more burly figures. A pistol butt thudded on the Sitka's skull and he went over like a pole-axed ox. Bill Haines went straight for June Royal and sent her spinning.

Magain wheeled on the groping Griff. "Madman!" he snarled, "where in Hades have *you* been! Fired the Police Post and damn near put our necks in a noose. Why the flamin' blazes didn't yeh grab the slut and tote her along? The whole blame population of Cedar Falls will be out and after us before sun-up. Quick, Bill, grab that gal! Tie her up and, for the love of Mike, gag her! Shove that bear fur in her face if she don't stop that squawkin'."

Griff gazed dumbly at his rescuers. In a minute they had tied the girl up hand and foot and wrapped her in the stifling folds of the bear fur. Haines and Magain between them carried her out. Coldwater Griff, shaking off the torpor that enveloped him, went halfway to the door. Then he stopped, and, with a glare of vindictive

hate in his sullen eyes, he returned and picked up the dog-whip. On the way out he stopped long enough to take two running kicks at the Indian on the floor.

Outside in the darkness, he heard Bully Magain's imperative voice calling sibilantly, "Come on, you bat-eyed fool. Do you want to see the inside of the Pen to-night! A damn nice game you've been playing. Norvice will be out after us in about two shakes. Bill and me was howlin' madmen ever to come down lookin' for you."

"Aw! Shut yeh face!" retorted Griff sourly. He staggered along and overtook them. "Say, Bully, jest ease up on that acid stuff. I've had all I want to-night from *anybody!* You get that under your hat and bite on it! I've had enough! First that human she-marten there put it across me as though I was a blarsted slave of Araby and she was queen of the earth; then dograst me if I don't run foul of that Siwash skunk of Endersley's. And I ain't in no mood to take hickory stick from you."

He lurched on in silence for a minute and then blurted: "And another thing you can keep your face shut about is Norvice. He won't be hitting out after us in about two shakes—nor never!"

Magain darted a swift look at him in the gloom.

"How so?" he jerked. "Fixed him?"

"Yep. He's having a holy argument by now with ole man Gabriel up agin the Pearly Gates. He probably wants to see his license number and to know whether he's properly assessed for claim tax. He's finished, anyway."

"Oh, yeh? How come?"

"I cooked him in the Police Post. Paraffin and policeman! Thought it 'ud go well together. Him and that high-and-mighty barkeep at the Come Inside were in there together. So I fixed 'em both. 'Strewth! The place was

roarin' in thirty seconds. I got Endersley's specimen stuff too."

Magain clicked his teeth and grinned in the darkness. "Coldwater," he admitted, "I allow you haven't been pickin' flowers, though Lord knows you've run it darn thin. We shall have to lay doggo for the devil of a time up in the Falls unless we can make a clean getaway tonight. We'll have half the North-West rampagin' out on our trail."

They hurried steadily on through the timber to the Bluffs, chuckling over Griff's story of how he put an end to the promising career of Sergeant Ralph Norvice of the Canadian Mounted.

All three of them would have been considerably concerned to know that at that moment Ralph Norvice and Josh Henderson were lying on their backs under the wooden bench in the cellar of the Police Post, their faces covered with their shirts soaked in water from the keg. They listened with a gasping eagerness to the queer noises going on above them, the thudding and battering of the rams, the breaking of the beams and timbers, the scattering of the fire, the dragging of the embers, and the hurrying of heavy feet overhead, while they slowly baked in a clay oven.

"Told yeh so—they're playin' ring-o'-roses; knew they'd enjoy themselves," gasped Josh. "Pity they haven't got a few catherine wheels and squibs to let off; they could make a real night of it."

They soaked and resoaked their garments and wrapped them about their faces till the scorching air penetrated even through the wet wads. They scraped hollows in the damp earth and buried their faces in them for relief from the fiery air.

Henderson coughed and wheezed.

"Sarn't, whichever way you look at it, we are in a hole," he said. "We may get out and we may not. Personally, I'd reckon we stand less chance than a snake's got hips. If we don't we shall know how the egg felt when madam said: 'Yes, please, waiter, hard-boiled, for mine.' And if we do, the odds are that you'll get fired for losing Government property and I shall find that the Magains have cleaned up my saloon for everything drinkable, smokable, and smashable in it."

The dull roaring of the flames had slowly died away, so slowly that they had scarcely noticed the change. They listened for long, painful minutes to the prodigious thudding and swishing going on overhead. Then there came an unmistakable bump on the stone slab. Norvice got up. The heat of the upper air made him reel. He groped blindly across to the "archives," got a heavy book and began banging at the slab from underneath. When he collapsed, Henderson took over the job. On Norvice's fifth relay there came answering thumps and a sizzling of water poured on superheated stone. In a couple of minutes the slab was raised and flung violently back on its hinges and a group of excited faces peered at them over the edge.

"Sergeant," said Henderson in a voice that was like the squeaking of the hinge, "here's the gentleman come to view the corpses."

When they got up, they deliberately stripped themselves and rolled in the cold wet grass. Oblivious of the eager, excitedly questioning crowd, they lay and revelled in the delicious coldness, draining the heat from their scorched bodies.

"It may give me pneumonia and it may give me more

pains than the telephone's got wrong numbers," observed Henderson dreamily to the stars, "and then again it may only kill me stone dead, but, anyway, it's cheap at the price."

Norvice sat up and grinned. "Phew!" he said. "Feel cooler now, old bird?"

Henderson shook his head sadly. "I'll never feel cool agen," he declared. "Even a cold snap in winter will fell unnat'ral hot after this."

Norvice slowly got dressed and gazed round at the ruins of the Police Post.

"Sitka Charley around?" he asked.

"No: faded half an hour back. But, say, Sarge, how'd it all happen? Fishy work somewhere, was it? The Sitka found a milk tin with a coupla holes plugged in it and he went streakin' off like blue lightin'. Say, was you penned in there from outside? Masterson said both them doorbars was swung tight home—and old Cod Keppel found this!" The speaker exhibited the blackened remains of the picture of Magain, Haines, and Griff with bullet holes through the eyes. "Belongs to you, don't it?" he asked.

"Give me that!" Norvice's voice crackled. He snatched the parchment, folded it and put it in his wallet. "That little business concerns me alone," he said grimly.

"Well, how'd it all happen, anyway?"

"Ask old Josh: he can pull you the whole story. He can tell it well, too—he's got a crack on the thinker that'll open out his real dictionary. Ask him. I've got a job on."

He broke off and turned out of the crowd, as Pierre Bonard ran up, agitated and out of breath.

"Well, Pierre, what's wrong?" asked the Mounted man, struggling with his felt.

"Quickly, Sergeant, come quickly. June has gone!"

Together they hurried up the foot trail to June Royal's cabin. Norvice went in and gazed around. Then he sat down with a bump, an outburst of passion on his tongue.

The shack was in a hopeless state of disorder. There was blood on the walls and the floor. All the little ornaments and draperies were upside down. Endersley was in a deathlike collapse on the bunk and both June Royal and Sitka Charley were missing.

"Gosh!" he muttered, "if that doesn't beat it! Pierre, you'll stay on here and get things fixed up for Endersley, won't you? I'll have to get word through to Dawson for a posse. That darn gang has had its rope. They've made for the Bluffs: maybe we can head them off with a file of troopers. Cedar Falls looks like being a hot shop for a day or two."

The minister caught his arm.

"You—you'll get Miss June back, Ralph?" The Baptist's eyes were sore troubled.

Norvice looked him hard in the eyes. "We shall *have* to," he said gruffly and hurried out.

## CHAPTER VI

For three hours the gang marched onward, climbing steadily. They maintained a grim, laboured silence except when one of them growled out a guttural order to June Royal, stumbling along between them. She was half dazed with exhaustion and numb with the shock of the events of the last hour.

Bill Haines had taken the suffocating bear fur from around her head and ungagged her as soon as the risk of her cries being heard was left behind. But her arms were still tightly pinioned and the strain of trying to keep her balance on what was little more than a steep goat-track had reduced her to a stumbling automaton. The only thing that kept her awake and moving was the ceaseless jab of Coldwater Griff's whipstock on her shoulders. He prodded her continuously, a gentle torture that was filling her shoulders with a dull ache that made her want to scream out every time the handle jabbed at her.

Higher up among the Bluffs they were joined by the remainder of the gang, a whole crowd of unwashed ruffians as full of fight and hate for the Law as the leaders themselves. They were the scum and scourings of the gold camps, all with the word "Wanted" writ large after their names and all of them boastfully guilty of the outrages that had forced them off the highways into the byeways.

Below them a great stretch of the river country was spread out bold and clear in the cold halflight of the Northern night. Far down in the valley the lights of Cedar

Falls winked and bobbed as though still agog with the excitement of the big doings they had just witnessed. A thick haze of smoke hung over the charred square where the Police Post had stood, and little black figures could be discerned hurrying about or talking excitedly in detached groups.

A moving caterpillar along the river-bank resolved itself into a scarlet-coated file of Canadian Mounted troopers, cantering smoothly in from Dawson City. Bully Magain watched them for a minute with sour grin on his face.

"Boys," he said, "the marionettes will now do their little piece. They'll be in Cedar Falls inside ten minutes and then the show'll begin. They'll start flappin' around as mad as a bunch of wet hens when they hear the news. Burnt their home, we have, and cooked their dear kind Sergeant, pinched twelve thousand dollars in straight gold, collared their local queen, and dropped an epitaph on the career of the boss of their only saloon! Gee, won't they be glad! Coldwater, I wouldn't be s'prised if they don't git real downright annoyed with you. They'll put a black mark on your book—sure!"

High on the broad plateau above the settlement they sat and watched the scene below with sarcastic glee. The leader of the troopers, a man magnificently mounted on a great high-stepping roan, scented trouble with a big T a quarter of a mile away. He turned his head and rapped out a word of command. Instantly the smoothly moving caterpillar accelerated and came sweeping up the trail at full tilt, heads low over the horses' necks, and the horses themselves stretching down to it in great leggy strides. Wide round the bend of the river they came, the whole line taking a fallen tree in its stride, like the moving hump

down a caterpillar in rapid motion. They wheeled round the outer timber clumps and pounded on into the village like a herd of high-spirited buffalo.

Coldwater Griff was stiff and sore with the hammering he had received down in June Royal's cabin. He was tenderly nursing a jaw that had been nearly dislocated by the Sitka's flying fists, and his eyes and lips were painfully puffed. He was in a sour temper and he vented it on the girl. He jabbed her with the dog-whip and pointed down at the troopers.

"Take a look at 'em," he rasped, "and don't look so perishin' sulky about it either. I'm the guy entitled to look crossways, and don't you forget it, me gal"—he jabbed her again with the whipstock—"you've got yours to come! Make no error: all you handed out to me down in that cabin is comin' back to you, with extras. By the time I'm done with you, you'll feel like a fresh broke Malemute at the end of its first hundred-mile run in harness. My oath you will!"

June Royal returned him a stony silence. She lay back against the stump of a gale-riven pine tree and closed her eyes with weariness.

Farther across the plateau, out of sight of the settlement below, a group of camp fires glinted in the trees, where the hirelings of the Skagway Syndicate waited to connect up with the gang. Magain very much wanted to see their chief. This new situation that had arisen required a good deal of consideration. It was a long run through to the Nahoni country, and he knew that runners would be out along every trail out of Cedar Falls before morning. The up-country trails would be dotted with sheriff's men and troopers all eager to pump a few rounds

into him. He knew, too, that their eagerness to shoot would only be matched by their uncharitable accuracy of aim.

He realized with a savage oath that he was in almost as unhappy a plight as Endersley himself. His one big trump card was that he knew where the Endersley gold mine was located—or he thought he did. By getting up to the location ahead of the Law, he knew he could turn that knowledge into the best part of a million inside twenty-four hours; but the question was, could he get through before the Law got its network of outposts and troopers streaming in toward him from every village and township around. The chances were, on a broad estimate, about sixty-five to one against. His chance of landing the full grand slam was as thin as the risk was thick.

The whole question of profit and loss, so far as he was concerned, turned on the amount of spot cash the Skagway agent happened to have in his possession. The Skagway people were sending up probably a score of men to peg out claims on their behalf. For each claim netted by those runners Magain would demand a specified commission and the syndicate had further announced their willingness to pay lump sums for each individual claim pegged by their gang. Magain knew that the sums offered were but a twentieth of the real value of the holdings, but he also knew that the legitimate peggings of ground claims did not absolve him nor his bunch from arrest on crime warrants as long as a lawyer's gown. The best his gang could hope to do was to peg, sell—and quit like lightning.

He decided that the idea of a live outlaw in the fastnesses of Cedar Bluffs appealed to his nature considerably more than did that of a millionaire swinging in the wind

on the end of a rope at Nahoni Pass. He had a secret. If the syndicate wanted it, the syndicate would have to pay for it—and pay cash. Murder, he decided, is always murder whether you just plain shoot your man, sling him over the Falls, crack his skull, or cook him in a wayside Police Post. And a hold-up, double murder, arson, theft, and abduction, all in one night, ought to make Cedar Falls a grand place to be out of for a year or two.

"Haines," he said, "go over and tell that smug-eyed city clerk I wanna see him in a hurry."

Haines grinned. "He'll like that, sure," he said. "He's been in a hurry himself for best part of a month. Soles of his feet been itchin' fit to crack waitin' on you. I'll tell him, sure—but he will laugh blue devils."

Haines went lurching off and Magain sat on a great boulder on the crest of the Bluffs and glared at the redcoats below. The fat white moon swinging high over the river to the southward drenched the valley in an incandescent flood of light, throwing every object into bold black-and-white relief. For a minute he watched them, muttering acidly to himself at their hectic hurrying and scurrying. High up on that lofty pinnacle he was acquiring something of the egotism of the god in the machine. He felt himself to be something very fine, a master cog, on whose revolutions every other little wheel turned. He was the real motive force—all the rest were mere absurd little pigmies dancing frantically to any ludicrous measure he cared to play. At that particular moment he was grandiloquently contemptuous of all those little mortals panicking about down there. Ever since he first jumped the American boundary they had been doing that. Wherever he went he always contrived to leave a seething flux of ex-

citement behind him, into which always jumped the redcoats—always a jump too late.

But the next moment his grandiloquent contempt received a jolt that took him right in the pit of the stomach. Down there in the valley, his unbelieving eyes saw something that shook him to the toes and knocked him sprawling off his pedestal of self-satisfaction. Bully Magain got the shock of his life.

All unconsciously his thoughts went flying nervously backward and forward along a sentence that had long since burned itself into his brain, a sentence that is at once the badge and boast of the Mounted—"The Mounties never come in without their man!" That slogan has been carted around the length and breadth of the North; on the pommel of a saddle, in the noose of a rope, in the fifty in the bandolier and the six under the trigger, on the tail-end of a dog team, over white trail and green, on running water and ten-foot ice, till there is not a square mile in all the Territories that has not heard it and does not bank on it. The lawbreaker has heard it to such good account that he believes in his own immunity only so long as the luck holds.

Bully Magain swallowed back an uncomfortable lump that poked up into his larynx. Still with his eyes feverishly on the pigmies below, he said:

"Griff—how many nuggets did you say there were in that haul?"

"Thirteen, dodgast 'em!"

"Shot if I didn't think so!"

"Why? What's up?"

Magain scowled at him viciously. "Nothin'," he snarled, "only I'd like to know why the hell you pulled that line

of dope to me about Norvice. D'ye think it's funny to stuff me up with a yarn about roastin' the life out of him, eh; d'ye think it's funny?"

"Whaddya mean?" Griff snapped in angrily. In spite of his aches and pains and burning resentment, he was proudly conscious of having performed a thundering good night's work on behalf of the gang. It was inconceivable and monstrous that Magain should even cast a doubt on the veracity of his story of his brilliant exploits; inconceivable and monstrously unfair. "Whaddya mean?" he demanded. "I notice you kept out of harm's way till I'd done all the work. What are yeh callin' me down for? Norvice is finished, I tell you. I finished him."

" 'S a lie! He gave you the slip!"

Coldwater Griff's righteous indignation swelled to a burst of sarcasm. "That's right, Bully," he mocked. "It was all a dream. Maybe the Police Post is still standing. Maybe Norvice was week-ending at the South Pole when my bullet kicked the tin; maybe these are only dream nuggets in a dream wallet; maybe that's only dream smoke down there in the valley!"

"I'm not questioning you fired the Police Post," retorted Magain. "I said, you lied when you told me Norvice was back-numbered."

Coldwater Griff snorted. "Aw! you make me tired!" he growled. "You're one of them unbelievin' Jews who won't believe your own darn death till yeh spook crawls out'n yeh body and shins down the tree to get a ground-floor view of its corpsy danglin' on the branch!"

Magain swore at him, a vitriolic stream of profanity that left Griff serenely unaffected.

"Now, lissen," he said, in a tone of a man who has a

perfectly unassailable case and wants the other to be reasonable about it. "Norvice went into that orfis after I'd clumped Henderson under the hat. The barkeep was all flat and fuddled. I collared the nuggets just before Norvice went in. I know it *was* Norvice—that perishin' parson don't parade around in a blood-coloured tunic and spurs, do 'e? Well, then, Norvice went in. And he lit a tin full of free oil. I clamped the door-bar and slugged holes in the paraffin through the window. The window was barred up in nine-inch iron squares. If either of 'em got outa that, he's a ruddy miracle!"

" 'Avin' said all of which," said Magain venomously, "just switch your lamps down there and take a look at that ruddy miracle waggin' his chin at them troopers in front of the Come Inside. And then take another look at that other ruddy miracle unlockin' the saloon door. Maybe them troopers are just goin' in to have a bracer with *two* ruddy miracles. Maybe that's Norvice's ghost waggin' his chin at his bunch of fish, Norvice's ghost with its hat and coat off—and maybe that's Henderson's ghost unlockin' the ghost of his darn saloon with the ghost of his blinkin' key, hey?"

Coldwater Griff peered down incredulously into the valley while Magain, with his hopes and plans knocked endways, presented him with a vocal effort that was the distilled essence of rhetorical carbolic. Griff's eyes opened wide and wider. A look of blank and utter astonishment printed itself ludicrously upon his face.

"By the holy hobs of hell!" he gasped. "Bully, I *am* dreamin'. That ain't Norvice: it's his perishin' shadder—Norvice is all sirloin and undercut by now, roasted whole in the Police Post."

Bully Magain pulled slowly to his feet.

"Yeh mad!" he said. "C'm on. We gotta fade. Rustle that gal along. If she starts screechin', clump her over the head. Don't sit there starin' like a stuck roe buck, get a move on. All that tribe down there will be streakin' up after us quick as winkin'. C'm on." He went off hurriedly and irritably toward the wood fires across the grassland.

Griff sat immobile for a full minute, struggling with his brain for the elucidation of the extraordinary feat of legerdemain by which Norvice had managed to wriggle out of that flaming death-trap. He felt that Fate had played him an unconscionably shabby trick. Not only had she revoked, she had double crossed him too. His temper edged down one degree nearer to complete rawness.

He took the moose thongs off June Royal's arms, prodded her with the whipstock, and growled: "March—and step lively or I'll play a tune on you with this that'll make you jump till your toes run hot." He shook the whip in her face, and prodded her again.

As they left the crest of the Bluffs, a brown, shiny-haired head peered cautiously up from behind a boulder a hundred yards down the slope and closely scrutinized the summit. Round its head was the plain white band of the Sitka tribe, the sign royal of chieftainship. Agile and silent as an eel, the apparition slid from cover to cover, mounting the precipitous slope with the effortlessness of a shadow. At the top it paused to reconnoitre before gliding soundlessly into the dark gloom of the spreading firs.

Haines and the agent met Magain halfway across the plateau. Magain was surly, the agent frigid.

Without stopping, Magain said: "Something's flown off the handle down there: wanna talk to you about it."

The agent fell into step at his side. "Get ahead," he said coldly, "your stories are quite amusing. What's the trouble now?"

"Mounted troopers just landed in from Dawson City, whole bunch of 'em. And—and there's other things too."

"Yes?"

"Awkward things: so awkward I can't make the trip."

"Well?"

"I'll have to sell outright."

"Oh, yes? I'll buy—if you've anything to sell, of course."

"I've got the location to a yard. I even know which way the crevasse points where they found the main outcrop."

"Um, ah." The agent grew more icy than ever. He had been fencing with Magain for nearly a month. Expenses were piling up and he was still where he started.

"If you start in right away you can get in well ahead of the main stampede. And *you're* safe enough. The posse can't touch you. You're one of those fly devils—always on the right side of the law."

"Um, ah!"

"I figure it out that my bunch will have to evaporate till things cool down a peg or two. If I was on my own hook, I'd pull it through, easy—but with a perambulatin' census like Norvice has got down there—not for mine. So I'll take spot cash for what I know."

"Um, ah, m'm."

"Say, bo, your conversation is just about the thrillin'est

thing I've heard since a trooper opened fire at me from my own bedroom window."

The agent neither smiled nor took his hand from his near side coat pocket. In a voice that might have wafted off a polar ice-cap, he murmured: "Go on, Bully, I'm waiting for the bad news."

Magain gulped and tabled his cards. "I'll take half a million, in cash, for our share—now!"

"Ah! I guessed it was on the way. Half a million, eh? No, you won't, Bully. Nor yet half a cent. I haven't got a dollar with me. I'm working on bills, payable on demand at the Company depots."

Magain scowled. "Am I talkin' to the agent or the blamed office boy?" he demanded.

"I represent my employers in the fullest capacity," said the agent quietly. "I am myself a metal chemist, and as such I can recognize gold when I see it. And, believe me, my dear Magain, I shall need to see it very plainly before I sign bills payable to you. Show me the ground. I'll assess its value within forty-eight hours—and I sign checks to the full stipulated value. Failing that, the checks stay in my wallet."

Magain's eyes glittered.

The agent noted it and smiled. "Those checks," he said calmly, "will only be cashed on receipt of a covering letter from me direct to the Company. If you're thinking of—er—say, being naughty toward me, you'll find you're on dud hunting. If you want to see me again, think over very carefully what you are going to say and then come over—I shall be right in the middle of my crowd of scallywags."

A little grey-white snowbunting went whisking by over-

head, a faint white smudge on the night, no bigger than a thrush. The agent's right hand whipped out of his pocket and a gunshot cracked and rattled among the rocks. The snow bunting flopped earthwards a couple of yards from where Magain stood.

"Good-night, Bully," said the agent gently.

Magain stood, speechless, while the agent sauntered across to his camp. For a minute or two he didn't quite know where he stood. Everything he had planned and schemed for seemed to have gone out of its way to go wrong. Even the alternatives crumbled to dust one after the other; the very ground seemed to have been knocked from under his feet, leaving him struggling feverishly for even a bare foothold.

Haines tapped him on the shoulder. "Bully," he said, with a throaty curse, "we seem to be rushin' about doin' a hell of a lot of nothin'. That city-shark has got us where we don't count."

Magain's eyes went red. "Bill," he said, "if you're comin' out with a line of rough-stuff talk on me, I'll thump the life out of you. I've been crossed all I can stand for one night. You keep your bit of acid under your tongue." He glared at his partner savagely.

Haines clicked his teeth. "Yeh nerves want feedin'," he said. He thrust his head up against Magain's ear. "Lissen. We're handicapped by the rest of the bunch. The numbers beat us. Now you, me, and Griff could make through to Nahoni on our own, dead-easy. We could cart that agent along with us—strike across country for it, and land the whole stake quick and certain."

Magain thought quickly, urgently. The voice of the

tempter was seductive. The glad promise it held out was mental music to him.

"You mean, quit the rest of the bunch?" he asked dubiously.

"Sure. Norvice will have roped most of 'em in before mornin'. They'll walk into any darn silly trap he lays. They're fools, anyway. Us three could clean up enough between us to clear out of here and go South. There's a little joint I know down in Kansas City . . ."

The leader cut him short and called Griff. "Coldwater," he said, "how do you feel about havin' a shot at the grand slam on your own: quit the gang and hit the miles for Nahoni hard and heavy?"

Coldwater Griff chuckled. "I guessed you'd think of one sometime," he said placidly.

They held a hurried council. Magain decided to make a quick get-away by canoe down the Little Cedar River to their cabin under the Falls, fit up with all the stores they could lay their hands on, and then get off for Nahoni Pass before dawn. They could cover their departure by posting the gang along the ridge of the Bluffs as though they intended to make a fight for it. Half a dozen marksmen along that ridge could hold up a battalion for the rest of the summer, let alone a handful of troopers. Norvice and his men, in their glaring scarlet tunics, would offer unmissable targets. The risks of trying to take the Bluffs by assault were so great and so obvious that Norvice would probably hold his hand for a while. Whether he attacked or not, the leaders would gain sufficient time to get clear in the canoes cached at the river-bank. The agent could be talked over, and as for June Royal, if she still persisted in being sulky, they could amuse themselves with her for

an hour and then give her a canoe ride over the Falls. That was up to her.

Magain called out the gang and posted them. They, who had obeyed him without question for six solid years, raised no querulous voices when they heard their orders. All unsuspicious of Magain's betrayal, they took up positions behind the great yellow boulders at the top of the Bluffs, blasphemously promising the Mounted a nickel-tipped reception.

"Redcoats look best with holes in 'em," advised Magain, and the gang approved of the sentiment to the extent of cutting notches in the noses of their bullets.

"We can hold this place for weeks," declared Haines.

"Sure," said the gang, and settled down grimly to wait for things to happen in the valley below.

Griff prodded the girl and marched her off toward the river. He was joined at the cache half an hour later by Magain, Haines, and the agent. The agent only decided to come along after weighing the pros and cons to the last meticulous detail. He drove Magain frantic with anxiety to get clear while the coast was open.

Little Cedar River was at the height of its summer flood. Snowfed streams and freshets poured into it in little torrents from the high lands and mountain ranges behind. Rivulets and spring feeds gushed into it at every twenty yards. After the violent turmoil of its birth, it steadies down a bit where it emerges on the ten-mile strip at the top of the Bluffs. Smoothly it sweeps across the raised plain, between high banks dotted with cedar, pine, and fir. In some places where the rock protrudes and the banks converge, the river slides swift and deep under great canopies of green branches. Three miles lower down it leaps over

the southern edge of the great plateau and falls sheer into the giant Yukon below, a magnificent hundred yards long curtain of perpendicular waters smashing down in a thunderous tumult of froth and foam, riven and torn by the gleaming fangs of the ledges halfway down—a spectacular surrender of a little river to the father of all the rivers of the North.

"I'll take the gal," said Magain, untying the mooring-rope of a canoe.

Griff coiled the dog-whip round his waist and his eyes met Magain's, definitely and keenly. "You'll take the counter-jumper," he said coldly. "The gal goes with me."

Magain looked at him and muttered under his breath, but when the party pushed off, Magain and the agent were in the lead, Haines was second in a single-paddler, and Griff, with June Royal in the stern of his boat, tailed along in the rear.

The boats were tiny, frail little things, answering quickly to every touch of the paddle. June was wedged tightly in the tapering stern, bound and aching in every limb.

"Keep close in to the shadows of the bank," whispered Magain as he pushed off. "If that bunch winds us now, they'll flay us."

Griff grunted and baled his boat out. The double load made her heavy in the water and, like most of his type, Griff had no great love for cold water, even as a dilute to whiskey. He got his name from the fact that he had never been known to use that particular commodity for any purpose whatever.

June Royal lay in the boat in a semi-conscious daze. She was dimly aware of Griff's great bulk in front of her driving his paddle blade into the water with strong forcing

strokes. He seemed to her like some great squattering ogre, huge and omnipotent. All she could see was the swaying outline of his head and massive shoulders, rolling from side to side as he drove home the paddle, and she shuddered at the awful idea of the strength they exuded. Those great shoulders seemed to epitomize the whole brutal strength of the gang to her.

And she had no illusions regarding the leaders of that gang. She knew they were as pitiless as they were cruel. A woman's honour to them was less than a dance girl's kiss, less than the prodigal smile of a flirt. And she was not blind to the fact that she was being taken, without a solitary hope of hindrance, to one of their secret rendezvous somewhere down at the head of the Falls, the existence of which probably not even Norvice himself was aware.

The night was bitterly cold. A keen, face-freezing wind swept down river from the snowcaps on the horizon, chilling her to the bone. Griff hugged close in to the bank, crouching his head now and then as the canoe shot by under outspread branches. The backthrow from his paddle drenched her continuously in a shower of freezing spray. The canoes crept on. She had a vague idea that Griff was trying to make up the ground he had lost when he stopped to bale his boat. The others were so far ahead she could not see them; they were lost in the gloom of the river ahead. She was obsessed with a dreadful feeling of loneliness, of being carried swiftly and helplessly to the end of all things on the bosom of that black, silent river. High up there in one of the lone places of the earth, on that dead curve of the world where the eternal hush of the silence is a grim kinsman to the immensity of the space over which it broods, June Royal felt the hope-

lessness of fear upon her; a flat, black terror that gripped into her soul. She looked into the dark, deep waters and struggled to free herself from the squeeze of the boat. Death in those icy waters would come quickly and generously, and even such an end as that would be preferable to living to face the dreadful life the gang leaders would force upon her. She strained desperately at the cords. But the boat and the moosehide held her fast.

The canoes swept on, nearer and nearer to the roar of the crashing Falls. She knew that in a few minutes the boat would be beached. They swept along under a tunnel of trees. Griff bent his head. Fifty yards farther on the river curved round a bend. Black against the star-spattered sky she saw a giant cedar standing sentinel at the bend, its branches sweeping over the water a bare six feet from the surface. If only her hands were free. June Royal was weeping softly. The silent night, the stars and the river alone knew the depth of misery that had fallen about her, black as the night itself.

And then, against the blackness of the cedar branch, she saw a yet deeper black, a shadow, an opaque ball of blackness coiled on its outer end. She stared at it wonderingly, until the canoe slid underneath it. The gurgling plish, plish, of the paddle ceased a few yards before the tree was reached. The boat drifted under in a silence that was profound.

Equally silently the astounding thing happened. Griff was kneeling in the canoe peering into the darkness ahead as the boat went under the outflung branch. Without even a rustle of sound, the black ball suddenly uncoiled. Four ferocious fingers and a bone-hard thumb flexed round Coldwater Griff's throat like the grip of a bulldog's jaws,

clamping into his gullet so fiercely that the outlaw's tongue was projected between his teeth, and the neck tendons were constricted and wrenched out of place. His eyes, goggling and horror-filled, found themselves staring full into the pitiless face of Sitka Charley, upside down, hanging by his knees from the cedar branch.

In an eighth of a second he saw that, and then he saw no more. Sitka Charley's other hand came down with a fearful thud on his skull. A great blackness crashed about him, a blackness that crashed again and was convulsed with livid streaks of red, a booming dinned in his ears louder and more terrible than the roar of the foaming Falls, and Coldwater Griff went limp.

The water swirled by the canoe as the boat jerked to a standstill. Slowly, with the Indian anchoring it to the branch by his grip on Griff's throat, it swung round in the current. The Sitka carefully stuffed his gun back into his belt and then, for the first time, he made a sound. He craned his mouth down to Griff's unhearing ear and hissed: "Pah! Pig! Pigdog!" It was the lowest depth of infamy his vocabulary could plumb.

Then he found himself in a quandary. He couldn't drop into the boat; his weight would have capsized it. June Royal was bound and unable to help him—she was unnerved by the frantic reaction of joy and relief and terror dispelled. So Charley released his hold. Griff collapsed in the boat and the canoe drifted from under the bough.

The Indian dropped like a plummet, head down and vertical, into the frigid water. A few strokes and he was alongside the boat, pushing it to the bank.

In something under ten minutes June Royal was stamping about on the grass trying to get her circulation back, a

transference of thirteen nuggets had been satisfactorily effected, and Griff was savagely bound with the dog-whip.

The Sitka are an implacable folk: they have some queer ways of their own—even as white men have—and there are certain things they resent, one of which is being called "Siwash." Charley made a gag of the whipstock, forcing it lengthways into the ruffian's mouth and jamming it in position with a turn of the thong behind the neck and round the butt end of the stock again. The thong itself he carried down Griff's back, up between his legs, handcuffed his wrists with a couple of clove hitches, took two turns of it round his neck and secured the lash to the stock.

Griff was trussed and helpless. If he struggled, he would choke. The Indian propped him up in the stern of the boat and kicked him off into midstream, a dumb, silent messenger of warning to his cronies that a Sitka is a dangerous man to annoy and a still more dangerous man to underestimate.

June Royal looked at him with eyes that were almost brimming over with tears, eyes that shone like drowning stars in the shadows of the night. She lost not a tiny morsel of maidenly sweetness nor feminine pride when she put her arms round his grizzled old neck and kissed him full square on the lips.

Charley received the gift of the gods with a flat calm in his heart. He scratched his head, and then, feeling in duty bound to make some observation on the matter, he did a most unseemly and vulgar thing, a thing that would have definitely shocked the etiquette of any suburban circle in the South. He pulled her head down close to his and whispered earnestly: "Bob Endere-lee—he damn fine feller,

sure! You nab him quick, Miss: he like you too—like hell, sure!"

June's face went an immediate and violent crimson. Her confusion was as adorable as it was genuine. The Sitka did not notice those facts, for the Sitka are also a stolid folk. And, besides, there was Princess Kilisoo, the light of whose star, young and fresh and rising ever in a sky unclouded, untroubled, was the light of—but no matter.

Charley turned, the incident completely dismissed from his mind, and led the way silently down toward Cedar Falls.

Somewhere about that time Bully Magain was luridly demanding of the disinterested stars what the sulphuric blazes had become of Griff and the gal. He was standing within four hundred yards of where Little Cedar River commits geographical suicide, and a damp, chilly mist hung over its grave.

He waited a few minutes and then the suave, gentle voice of the syndicate agent broke in upon him.

"Probably that is him out there in midstream," it said. "He is riding solo, you'll observe. Also the estimable gentleman appears to have suffered a reverse. He looks quite quaint with his mouth full of dog-whip, does he not?"

What Magain said when they got him ashore and he told his story made even the agent raise his eyebrows in mild surprise.

## CHAPTER VII

Endersley opened his eyes again at noon the next day. The windows were open and the sun was pouring in. June Royal was bustling about the cabin, fresh and vigorous after a long, badly needed sleep at the Mission House.

Endersley watched her in a misty sort of maze as she arranged fresh flowers in the vases. This time the flowers were chosen as much for their beauty of colour as their fragrance. He regarded her with a growing puzzlement in his eyes. He had some dim, half-crazy idea that she was dead or terribly injured or something equally appalling.

Ah, that was it, of course. She ought not to be there. The Magains had got her.

He sat up slowly in the bunk, his face drawn and harassed.

"June," he whispered.

She looked up from a great bunch of prairie roses. "Good-morning," she said.

The tinny bell of the old clock on the nail tanged twelve times, clicked and stopped.

"I *should* say, good-afternoon," she corrected.

Endersley stared at her. "June, my—my dearest—is that really you?" he asked gently.

"Mr. Endersley, I assure you I am neither the Queen of the Cannibal Isles nor her mother-in-law, if any. What on earth is the matter with you?"

"But—but, last night, lassie! Coldwater Griff—Sitka Charley—the whip—" he turned his head suddenly and

looked at the wall: a dog-whip, neatly coiled, hung on the peg. "But—surely—didn't Magain and Haines come in just as you and old Charley were—"

"Bosh! I told you you were overtaxing your strength. *Now,* sir, perhaps you will believe me and obey me when I tell you to go to sleep."

"But—I—they—gosh! I could almost swear to it. It was as real as—"

"Pure taradiddle, my man: slight touch of imbecility, maybe. If you don't cool down at once, sir, I'll pour a whole pint of cod-oil down your throat."

She went out gaily for some more flowers, and Endersley lay back and marvelled at the most vivid hallucination he had ever had in his life. Purely by way of satisfying his own querulous doubts, he reached over for the tin bowl that always stood against his head, the bowl filled with the night-scented star-flowers. There was a great dent in it.

He put the bowl back with a shaking head. Ten minutes later he was still muttering, "Holy Moses, what a girl! What a real, feminine, salt-of-the-earth, bred-in-the-bone girl!"

The days that followed were a garden of memories, rose-scented and dawn-tinted, for the man on the bunk. Slowly at first, and then with gathering speed, he regained his strength.

In a week he was out and about, a little walk the first day, a longer one the second, a canter on Norvice's horse the third, a canoe trip on the big river the fourth.

The eighth day of convalescence was the last: for on that day he fought a French Canadian to a standstill on the floor of the Come Inside because that man was fool

enough to make a Gallic jest, full of Frenchy innuendo, about June Royal's fondness for having a man in her shack all night.

There were hours that were filled to the brim with the joy of being alive, with the intoxication of being in love with love. He came upon her sometimes in dewy evenings when the red sun swam among the distant trees in liquid pools of ruby fire and the flower-starred woods were aromatic with the incense of bush and blossom. On those evenings he experienced all the delight and misery of the tongue-tied, for there are times when mutual sympathy has established such a perfect understanding that even the sound of the human voice is an outrage. It jars on the senses as sharply as would jazz music in a cathedral at eventide.

There was another wonderful day up in Forty Mile that wonderful day when he and June found Sunnygold, the grandest, stoutest-hearted dog that ever pulled lead in a team. It was one of those things that just happened.

He had found that June's company was a very real necessity to him—and in quite a novel sense. Cedar Falls was living on the hair-spring of hysterical expectation where he was concerned. Every miner and trapper in the vicinity had his stampeding kit ready packed and waiting to jump out on trail the moment Endersley moved. The whole settlement became a highly organized espionage system, shadowing his movements wherever he went.

Directly he moved out of his cabin, no matter what for—fishing, shooting, riding, hunting, or even for a harmless walk through the woods—there was a slamming of doors in Cedar Falls and the entire population moved off in his wake. They were sixty-odd shadows that suspected

guile in his most innocent rambles and they dogged him relentlessly.

The situation was not without its humour, but still it was a nuisance. In his heart he acknowledged he couldn't be angry about it—he knew the mad urge of the Gold Voice himself, and he knew that every poor devil in Cedar Falls would walk his legs off in his effort to get in big when the great strike came off. He would have done the same himself were the circumstances reversed.

But still that sort of thing was not to be tolerated if a remedy could be found. And he quickly found that remedy: a very delightful remedy it was too.

He found that whenever he went out with June they left him alone. They knew that he wouldn't dream of asking June to make that journey with him and they argued that whenever he went out with her he was merely doing a little sweethearting, and that, consequently, it was perfectly safe to leave him alone and get in a little sleep while the chance offered.

Being a graceless young reprobate and believing wholeheartedly in the mistaken dictum that all is fair in love at least, he played his remedy for all it was worth, pleading for her company to give him relief from his sixty-odd shadows.

She was with him on the day he rode up to Forty Mile on an outfit-buying expedition. The stores dot the muddy main street of Forty Mile like so many second-hand clothes shops in a market street. Furs and sleds and stoves and block-fuel, snowshoes, pack tents, season outfits, bales of grub, and the whole gamut of Northern necessaries are spread about inside and outside the plank-built depots in odorous confusion. And here and there a bunch of dogs

are penned, snarling and snuffling among themselves. They were mixed lots, Malemutes, Huskies, Hudson Bays, with here and there a browner Eskimo Samoyede, more eager for fight than the wolf itself.

He had already bought several in Dawson City, fine dogs all, broad in the chest, peak-nosed, lusty and trusty. And there, cooped in a pen in a main street dealer's, he found his own leader, Sunnygold: the dog he wouldn't eat and wouldn't kill when the frost devils were beginning to eat into his brain. Tawny yellow she was, keen, bright-eyed, and square underfoot. He knew her the moment he saw her.

He beckoned the dealer over.

"Say, how much do you want for that yellow one?" he asked.

"Hundred and forty dollars, my cocker—and worth every cent of it."

"Not a doubt of it," assured Endersley. "What do you call her?"

"Princess. I reared her myself from a couple of champs—last year's winners on the Yukon Championship Race."

"Did you really! You're quite sure about that?"

"It'll snow in the winter," said the dealer without a spark of humour in his voice.

"Princess, you said?"

"Yap, kid; that's what I said."

"Well, now, just watch this."

Endersley leaned over on his horse and whispered to June. "Call her, June, call her. Her name's Sunnygold."

June's eyes shone. She had heard the fine story of Sunnygold, heard it from Endersley himself, and in her

imagination she had come to love the splendid creature almost as much as did Endersley.

Her clear, eager voice cut in among the quarrelling noise of the dogs.

"Sunnygold! Sunnygold!"

The dealer nearly fell over in his astonishment at what happened. Sunnygold let out a howl of delight that jolted the whole pen into sudden silence. There was a rush and a flurry in the compound and a tawny body shot clean out of it, five foot sheer over the rails, landed in a hectic whirl of fur and paws and tail on the other side, and went mad with delight round Endersley.

Endersley paid him over the dollars. "What name did you say she was?" he asked.

"What you said, my cocker. I muster been thinking about some other dog," said the dealer unabashed.

"Sure you must," agreed Endersley, touching his horse with his heels.

There were days, too, when all Cedar Falls stayed indoors and played cards to while away the hours when bullets sang and hummed among the shacks from the ridge-line of the Bluffs. The outlaws, desperate at having been left in the lurch by their leaders, held on tenaciously to their ramparts. Whenever they detected signs of unusual activity among the redcoats below, they immediately opened up a fusillade, peppering away at any and every target that offered.

"What are we going to do about those blighters?" asked Endersley one day when the guns had been cracking away unusually heavily on the hillside. He, Norvice, June Royal, and Charley were playing a four-hander at bridge with a disreputable pack of cards. A window had been broken

that morning by a flying bullet and he was thanking his stars that June had not been there when it happened.

"Seen my troopers about lately?" asked Norvice.

"No, don't think I have—got no hearts, June?" June intimated that she was absolutely heartless and whanged a trump, without the slightest remorse, on the disgusted Charley's trick.

"Well, that's what we are going to do about those blighters. My boys have gone up country. We're having a shot at the big round-up to-night. My bunch cuts across country to get behind them and take them on the flank. All the Cedar Falls boys are going to do a little cliff-climbing from this side as soon as the moon goes down. Fixed all the main points this forenoon over at Henderson's place. The boys here are keen-hot on it. Those hoodlums up there are booked for an almighty lean time when Cedar Falls gets up to 'em. I booked you a place in the main bunch—guessed you wouldn't be hanging back when the fun starts. That suits you, I s'pose?"

"Sure!" said Endersley. "There's a couple or three gentlemen up there I want to be introduced to. And I don't think we shall like each other."

"I doubt if you will find them. From the way that crowd has been carrying on, I'd say they are a rabble. I believe their leaders have hit the skyline."

"You don't seem over-happy about it?"

"I'm not. If they've cleared out, they've cleared out for a mighty good reason. And that reason is probably Nell o' the Dance Halls. I packed her off out of Cedar Falls. But she hasn't been seen either in Forty Mile or Dawson. She knows where your gold mine is: and if she's connected up with that gang again, we've got the devil of

a time ahead of us. That's why I'm making the big round-up to-night. We've *got* to find out how much that crowd know."

Endersley frowned.

"We shall probably nab the whole shooting-match to-night," continued Norvice. "But I don't care much if the three leaders *have* got away. I want to land that bunch with the goods on!" The Mounted man gritted his teeth. "Those three are either going to swing or they are going to the Pen for life!" He swore.

June Royal looked across at him quickly. The hawk-like face had suddenly turned ferociously malignant, merciless. At that moment he seemed to epitomize the legendary attitude of the Mounted. So lost to the game was he that he carefully capped his partner's winning jack with a king.

A moment later he laughed, gathered in the trick, and said there was nothing like making doubly sure of anything.

Sitka Charley, stolid and serene, calmly dropped a lighted squib into the conversation. "You want Nell? I seen Nell," he announced disinterestedly.

Norvice dropped his cards. "What?" he snapped.

"Saw he yes'day. She said she wanna see Miss June."

"Where was this?"

"Down river. She said you make her frighten."

"Frighten!" rasped Norvice. "I'll frighten her! That vixen wants shooting." He kicked his chair away. "Endersley," he said, "when can you be ready to start? I'm dead certain that she-cat is trying to connect up again with Magain. And, by hokey, if she does, you'll have to light out as fast as legs and horses can carry you."

Endersley rubbed his chin. "Can't start much before next week, Sergeant. Only got half an outfit together yet. And you know what my plans are."

"If that wretched girl is still hanging around, you'll have to forget every plan you've made—and work out a new set to-night. Charley, come along o' me!" The Sergeant went out in a hurry, calling for his horse.

The Sitka looked at Endersley with a question in his eyes. Endersley nodded and the Indian, perfectly satisfied, went out after Norvice.

The two of them left alone in the shack began to play casino. But after a while the game hung fire. June wanted to talk to dissuade Endersley from joining in with the attempt at rounding-up the outlaws, but she hardly liked broaching the subject. Endersley, too, wanted to talk, and he was not so delicate in the matter of coming to the point. After a game in which the luck had gone all one way, he put his cards down and looked at her searchingly across the table.

June sensed an electric prickle in the atmosphere and proceeded to gather up the cards and lay them out for solitaire.

"June." Endersley had propped his chin on his fists and was looking full at her.

"Yes?"

"Would you—would you be very offended if I—if I asked you a very pointed question?"

She looked at him with mock shyness out of the corners of her eyes. "Questions like that," she parried, "are only answered in the police courts. Elegant people never ask pointed questions."

Endersley put his hand out and took the cards from her. She surrendered them without a word.

"June, I want you to be serious," he pleaded.

"Very well, then," she said, colouring a little.

"I want to ask you what brought a perfectly wonderful and adorable girl like you out here to this unholy country?"

She looked at him in silence.

"You are from the South," he persisted. "All your tastes and likes and dislikes are born of the South. Your very nature is one with the sunshine and warmth of sunny lands. Won't you tell me?"

"You are not one of the North-born."

"I know, but I am a man and this is a man country. I am a younger son—and younger sons are not expected to clutter the home towns longer than they can help. You are different. You are Girl, the very essence and soul of all that is dainty and feminine and sweet and adorable. This is not your element: you are out of place, frightfully out of place."

She looked at him quizzically. "Men are terribly inquisitive creatures, aren't they?" she said. "They don't care much whether they rake out old family histories so long as they forage out some silly little point that has piqued their curiosity, do they?"

"I—I'm awfully sorry, June. I wouldn't have hurt your feelings for worlds. I—"

She waved her hand lightly and smiled. "Let me ask *you* a question." There was a wistful seriousness in her eyes. "Do you know your own folk? I mean, when you were a tiny tot, did you have the dear blessing of family life: mother, father, brothers, sisters, and all the glad,

happy atmosphere in a home that only your own folk can give? Did you?"

Endersley gazed dumbly at the girl.

"Yes," he said quietly, after a long pause. "My boyhood was as happy as I could wish, as happy as even a younger son could wish. My youth was a very perfect period: now, it is a very perfect memory. To-day I know that I loved every hour of it."

"Well, I never did. I never knew my own people. Mother died when I was born. Dad, I understand, came a fearful cropper in business. The shock killed him. Out of the wreck of his affairs the lawyers built themselves homes of their own and rescued a little for me. My home life was an awful succession of boarding-schools and paid guardians, grim old dragons who seemed to have stepped out of the year 1870. Not until my twenty-first birthday was I told anything about my own people. I had almost come to regard myself as a foundling, an unwanted. Then for the first time I was told I was not all alone in the world. I had a brother. A strong, young, well-set-up young boy who, when the crash came, refused to be bossed about by a long succession of schoolmasters and dragons. He went out—out. Oh, you can't think how I longed to find him, to speak to him, to be near some one of my own folk! The lawyers found out that he had last been heard of in Dawson City, years ago, in the days of the Stewart stampede." She stopped and looked at him with big lustrous eyes that seemed to plead for understanding more than sympathy. She put her hand on his, impulsively. "You—you do understand, don't you?" she begged. "You see, the feeling of loneliness and of wanting to find him was so big—and so wonderful that—"

Endersley breathed deeply. "June, little girl, you beat me every time," he said gently. He took her hands in his, quickly, earnestly. "Little lassie," he said, "you shall find that young brother of yours, though the Klondike freezes fifty foot thick. You shall find him if he is still to be found. I'll get Norvice to enlist Headquarters; they know most pedigrees this side of the boundary. I'll sound all the big trading companies and the carriers. If necessary the gold mine can stay and rot."

She smiled, through eyes that were very near to tears. "I wouldn't dream of allowing you to be so foolish," she said. "Besides, he isn't young. He's nearly fifteen years older than I am."

Endersley caught her on the hop. "So that he is—?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Forty," she said innocently. Then she made a hurried little exclamation of confusion and ran headlong out of the shack, for Endersley was working out her age in an elaborate pantomime on his finger-tips.

A man in love will do a great deal for his girl—a great deal that he would not do even for himself. It is the only period of a man's life when he ceases to be a hundred per cent selfish. And Endersley, the moment June Royal had gone, was seriously considering the proposition of throwing up his gold mine project, even though it was within his grasp, and concentrating his whole energies on finding June's last surviving relative.

"Gosh!" he muttered, "a brother she's never seen! Four years battling a lone trail in the frozen North to find a brother she's never seen. Lord! That girl is gold all through—right through to the heart—and that's a great big pulsing diamond."

It is one of the odd coincidences of life that a goal that one mortal has been struggling to attain for four solid years may be attained by some one else in four single minutes. Within four minutes of June Royal running in blushful dismay from the cabin, Robert Endersley was presented with the secret that June herself had spent four years in trying to run to earth. And it all happened as simply as that.

There came a soft, timid tap on the door, and Endersley hollered out, "Come right in."

A girl came in, a stranger to Endersley, a wan, pale girl with a haggard face and frightened eyes. She closed the door carefully after her as she came in.

Endersley stood up and offered her a chair, but she shook her head.

She came right over to him and looked at him hard in the face, without fear, with just a touch of the old brazen dare-devilry in her poise.

"You're Endersley, aren't you?" she asked flatly.

"Yes. Robert Endersley."

"M'm! You seem a decent sort. They said you were. Sweet on Miss Royal, too, they say."

Endersley coughed. "Do they? Well, er—suppose we admit the fact?"

"Nell's my name. Nell o' the Dance Halls. Go on, now kick me out. They've all been kicking me out, ever since I turned straight—all the whole crowd of them, except Miss June."

"My poor girl, I'm not going to kick you out. Indeed, you can stay here as long as you . . ."

"Listen! I can't stay here. Norvice will flay the hide

off me if he finds me here. He thinks I'm double-crossing you, but I ain't, man, I ain't."

"Of course you're not. Now come and sit down for a little while. You look absolutely ill."

"Not ill, man: just hungry, that's all. But say, I can't wait around. I've got to find Miss June." She broke off and stared at him again. "Maybe you could do it better than me," she muttered, "you being sweet on her."

She caught him by the coat flaps. "You gotta get that girl away out of here," she said earnestly. "D'ye hear that? Take her away: miles and miles away: now, before she finds out."

"But, my dear woman, what on earth are you talking about?"

"D'ye know why she's come out here?" she demanded.

"Yes, to find her brother."

"That's right, man. And Miss June is the sweetest little kid that ever happened in this damned hole: the only one who ever had a smile and a helping hand for me. And I say you gotta get her away."

"But—but—what—"

"Look ahere, man, I know who her brother is."

"Who?"

"It's Bully Magain."

Endersley gazed at the travel-worn, weary little slip of humanity in front of him. He looked at her foolishly as though unable to grasp at the truth of what she had just said.

"Go on, say it!" she flared up. "Tell me I'm lying. Tell me I'm mad. Go on, bash me and kick me out. That's the way they all do. It'd be a bit of a miracle to be treated any other way by a man!"

Endersley did not hear her. Every cell and tissue of his brain was filled and spilling over with the dreadful knowledge of what might have happened up there on the bluffs—June Royal alone in that cabin by the Falls with a bullying ruffian who was unaware of her own identity. He felt a cold perspiration oozing out on his forehead and the palms of his hands suddenly went clammily cold.

Perhaps this dance woman, this Nell o' the Dance Hall, also shared his knowledge; perhaps she, too, knew that for a few terrible hours June Royal had been helplessly at the mercy of those callous outlaws. Perhaps that was why she was so desperately anxious to see June removed from all possibility of further contact with them.

And then came the slow reaction of unbelief. The thing was too awful for truth: too inconceivably dreadful to be anything but a ghastly delusion on the part of the dance girl. Her loyalty had run away with her. She had let her devotion get out of hand. Besides, how could she possibly know? It was altogether beyond credulity.

He loved June Royal, loved her with all his heart and soul, and had told her so on a hundred dear delightful occasions. There was no silly mawkishness between them. She returned his love in glad and full surrender. Deep in her understanding little heart she knew that he would ask her the most wonderful question of all as soon as he had staked his claim on his new location. Until he had done that, she knew he was in no financial position to ask any girl so tremendous a question as that.

He had hoped and prayed that things were at last running right for them both, and that as soon as the snows came he could harness his dog team and get his last weary grind across the snow deserts finished and done with. His

one great hope was that this was to be the end of his battling in the North, his last season on the blind white trails.

And here was this dance girl, this pariah of the gin-bars, jumping in on his hopes with this new and extraordinary complication.

In a semi-daze he heard the dance girl's voice again, earnest, pleading. She was right up close to him, staring hard into his face.

"Take her away, Mister Man," she was saying, the words tumbling out of her mouth in a pitiful hurry. "Take her away if you want her happy. Better she should hunt for twenty years and never find him than find the animal I found.

"And it's the truth I'm giving you, Mister. I ain't herded with that gang season after season without hearing all they got to tell. They've rammed their sorrows down my neck and hammered 'em in under my hat till I know 'em by heart—you know the way men get when the tanglefoot is all sloshin' about in their heads. All sick and sorry for themselves and as full of self-pity as the river is of water. And every word of what Bully Magain has wept over, night after night in the gin-dives along the waterfront, tallies with the run of June Royal's story. Take her away, Mister Man, take her away and keep her away. You can do it. If you can't, you're the milkiest Romeo that ever hit the Klondike."

Endersley found himself staring at the girl like a man in a dream. He realized in a breath-gripping second that the outcast girl spoke nothing less than the ghastly truth. She was too horribly in earnest and too sure of herself for there to be any doubt of the genuineness of her knowledge.

She had no delusions. Her devotion was sober and sound. She *knew*.

He pulled a chair up to the table, and wiped his forehead.

"Sit down a little while and rest," he said jerkily. "I'll get you something to eat. After you've rested we must talk this—"

"I ain't goin' to rest and we ain't goin' to talk!" she flared back. "My orders is 'Fade' and they came straight from the horse's mouth. Norvice would put me in the way of a coffin if he knew I was still in Cedar Falls. No, Mister Man, this is a job where you *act*. Talking won't help you none—and I got nothin' more to tell."

"Oh, but that's all wrong. Norvice won't harass you while I'm around, believe me. You just stay on here as long as you care to—I'll see that Norvice does the right thing by you."

The dance girl laughed, a hopeless, mirthless laugh.

"Oh, don't you worry your handsome head about Nell," she said bitterly, and slipped back unconsciously into her old defiant saloon-bar manner. She tossed her head, a pretty determined little head, Endersley thought. "Nell has looked after herself on too many rough trails to need a big brother to smooth out the passage. And besides Norvice is all right: he's a bit rough, that's all. Can't look at things from a gal's point of view. All the Mounted boys are that way—proud, headstrong lot of blighters, but they mean right. Ralph reckons he's in right about me. But he ain't, see?"

She crept toward the door muttering: "Now, if I can snoop away behind those elder bushes before he comes around, I'll be as good as safe."

She opened the door and peered out furtively.

"Yes, but—hey, where are you going? What are you going to do?"

"Me, laddie? I'll probably get a job as Vampire Queen of the Movies; or maybe I'll start up a revivalist movement down in Dawson that'll sell 'em out of prayer books quicker than flapjacks in a famine, or perhaps I'll go and astonish 'em all away down South and get myself elected first gal President of the States. Th' ain't no telling what heights a reformed rake can climb, though I allow it's a bit tougher if you happen to be the rake's sister."

Endersley pulled her back into the cabin and slammed the door.

"That stuff's no use to me," he said quietly. "I'm not going to let you go like that."

"Is that so, my lord?" she said grandly.

"Yes, that is so. Things have so happened here recently that my say-so counts for a whole lot in Cedar Falls. Norvice is a friend of mine. I can put him right about you in less than two minutes. If you're in good with Norvice you'll be square on your feet and square with the game. He's got nothing against you except that he believes you are carrying information to the Magains. But I can fix that up for you all right. I'll be pleased to."

"Yes, you won't!" Nell turned on him savagely. "Look ahere, Mister," she said, "you just leave me my little laugh on Norvice. Man in general has given me a pretty thin time of it since I first shook a toe on a gin-table. Man has had the big laugh on me for more years than you've seen freeze-ups. Ha'pence, they said, was bad for me, but the kicks 'ud do me good. And I got 'em—*copieusement,* as the Frenchies say. And this is where

I get the laugh back on Man. See? I've got the whole hundred-per-cent grin on Norvice over this, and the glory of it is that he don't know it. But, believe me, Mister, it's worth it. He's such a great big he-male-masculine man that it's kind of good to be passing him the buck. You leave me and him alone—*he's* holding the baby!"

Endersley sat on the table and scratched his head. This queer girl with the hopeless reputation and the courage of a pine-marten had him more or less dumbfounded.

He wasn't to know that it was costing her every scrap of will power in her tired little body to put up that magnificent bluff of a reckless bravado. Every little morsel of her ached and longed to fall on that warm-blanketed bunk and sleep for hours and hours and hours. She wanted to grasp like a starveling at Endersley's offer of friendliness and help. As it was, her independence was such that Endersley just looked at her distractedly and wondered what the dickens he could do about it.

"Well, look here," he said at last. "If you won't stay on and see it through, will you promise to keep a tight mouth on what you have just told me? If this matter gets around, tongues will start wagging and it will get to June's ears almost before you know you've let the cat out of the bag. It would be the wickedest thing one woman ever did to another if you—if you did that, Nell."

Nell looked at him with a withering pity.

"You're mad, my lad," she said bluntly. "D'ye think I risked crawling back here with that story so's I could go stampeding round afterwards with my face behind a megaphone? I was going to pitch her the yarn that she'd find her brother 'way down in the cattle country. Had it all fixed, good as gold. Sure, you're mad!"

She stopped and thrust her head forward in a tense attitude of listening. Endersley heard a soft, vicious "damn" jerk out under her breath. A couple of moments passed and the cause of it became apparent. Bold, steady footsteps were approaching the cabin, footsteps in which the jink of spurs merged with the flat clump of leather.

Nell looked round like a cornered rat.

"This is your dratted fault," she said exasperatedly. "If you hadn't pulled me back, I'd have been halfway across the river by now."

The latch clicked and the door swung open. Norvice put one foot over the doorsill and then caught sight of the girl. He stopped dead, half in and half out of the cabin, staring at her. There was unbelief, amazement, and anger all fighting at once in his eyes. He came slowly on into the room and stopped in front of her. There was a cold brutality about his attitude that stood out as sharp and clear as the colour of his flaming tunic.

"So you think you can flout a fair and honest warning, do you?" he rasped. His voice was as cutting as a knife edge.

"No, Sergeant darling, I just *had* to come back and see your sweet face again," she answered acidly, though her very soul was wilting within her.

Norvice grabbed her wrist. "Cut that out!" he snapped. "This is where you wish you'd lit out to the other side of the equator. That's the—"

"Just a moment, Sarge!" Endersley stepped forward and laid a hand on the Mounted man's shoulder. "Not too rough with that kid—she's had a bit of a tough run. Just let me explain."

Norvice wheeled on him.

"Mr. Endersley," he said coldly, "I'll trouble you for leave to attend to my own business. This is an affair you know nothing at all about and I'll thank you not to interfere."

"This *is* my business. I don't care a blind bat what you've got against that girl—you haven't got a sniff in a snowstorm to offset what she has just done for me. You've got her all wrong. I want—"

"Bah! She's kidded you the same as she's kidded the rest. This little devil is the cutest actress this side of the footlights and she bluffs the crowd of you. This is my show. I've had enough of her."

"But just listen a minute—"

"You just listen to *me!*" Norvice blazed. "I've just had news down from the boys on the Bluffs that Magain and Company haven't cleared out yet. The three of them are still up there in some darned secret cubby-hole of their own. They haven't shifted. Why? Is it because they know we've got every trail out of Cedar Falls peppered with foresights and trigger-fingers? Is it because they don't know the way to Nahoni? Is it because they like the scenery up there or because they're scared to move? No! It's because they're waiting for this brat! That Nahoni Pass story of Sitka Charley's hasn't carried. Either they've smelt the badger or she's put them wise. She figures on crawling back up there with the whole blame show-down in her outfit. I keep telling you, Endersley, she's nothing but a renegade, she's been double-crossing you ever since you first hit the floor of the Come Inside—and I'm through!"

"Well, I'm not!" Endersley spoke very deliberately, but very quietly. "That girl is doing her best to cut loose

from the old game and run straight. And, Norvice, she's going to get that chance if we have to peel off our coats and have a hammering match right here in this cabin. And I assure you, I shall still be standing when you're counting the logs in the roof. That, you may understand quite clearly, is not a threat, but an assertion. I mean it. But before you unbutton your coat, I'd like to point out a bunch of facts. That girl has done no wrong. If she has, you've got no evidence. If you have, you've got no warrant. And this is a private cabin in which she has even more right than you. Over and above that, I've just offered her hospitality here for as long as she cares to stay—and that offer stands!"

Norvice set his teeth grimly. "That stuff's good drama, but poor law!" he growled. "The Mounted goes as far as its gun will carry it and you can wager your mine against that!"

For a minute he looked from one to the other, mentally figuring his course of action. He rubbed his chin.

"No!" he muttered reflectively. "We won't fight about it, Endersley—that doesn't quite fit into my reading of Rules and Regulations. But that gal ain't goin' to get away with it this time. To-night is the big round-up of those hoodlums up on the Bluffs. I've got plans out to corral the hull bunch and she knows it. And believe me"—his voice took on a vicious note—"she ain't goin' to move a leg outside of this shack, not if—" He picked up a chair, took it outside the cabin door and sat down in it, laying his gun square across his knees—"Not if I have to keep you both penned here on the end of my gun till the show's over. The first one of you who puts a boot across that doorsill gets it where a doctor will only be in the flamin'

way. I won't worry—the inquest will only assess what size you take in fools." Norvice cocked his gun and glared sullenly at them.

A flicker of a smile crinkled the corners of Endersley's mouth. He went over and leaned against the doorpost with his thumb under his armpit.

"And you're game to sit there for four hours doing that?" he asked, cocking an eye at the sun.

"I'm doin' it!" retorted Norvice, and twirled the gun.

Endersley filled his pipe and lit up.

"You realize that we are acting like a couple of fool school kids?" he said, treading on the match.

"Sure!" responded Norvice grimly, "but, by heck, I'll shoot!"

Endersley saw the untameable sea-green glitter snap up in the bitter eyes and he knew that the Mounted man's finger would tighten the moment he attempted to test his warning. Norvice was one of those men who, playing continually with fire, wore asbestos gloves.

"Tell you what," said Endersley, realizing the impossibility of the situation, "I'll send for June Royal. She will keep an eye on Nell and swear an affidavit, if you want her to, that Nell won't shift from here till the job's through. We can't mess around here like a couple of lunatics with things getting soupy up there on the Bluffs."

Norvice nodded. "That'll do me," he said. "I'm just impressing on your soft skull that I don't trust that woman any farther than I can see her."

He went over to her and growled in her ear. "I'll have a trooper up there on the range, covering this cabin with a rifle. If you move outa this door you'll drop. If you

shin up outa the window and I find you, you'll drop. And if—''

Nell o' the Dance Halls broke in upon his venomous warnings. ''And if you take my tip, young feller, you'll steer clear of that big boulder up alongside the Falls. If you don't *you'll* drop—and what's more, *you won't hear the crack of the gun that drops you!* There's silent bullets spittin' around up there by that boulder. And now go and bite your eye, you great big wonder-man—little Nell wants to go to bye-bye.''

Norvice turned to Endersley. ''You hear that?'' he said heatedly. ''I tell you, she knows more about this business than you and I put together. She's been the runner between them and us all the time.'' He stopped her as she was climbing on the bunk. ''Hey, you! You know where Magain is now, don't you?'' he demanded.

''Sure, dearie.''

''I mean you know where his secret cubby-hole is located, eh?''

''Sure as Jack Frost made red noses, young man.''

''Well, where is it?''

''North of New York, sweetie, and a lump west, believe me. Sorry, but that's all the information available in the bureau. I'm not double-crossing Bully any more than I'm double-crossing you. All I'm telling you is to keep away from that big boulder. I'd just hate to see that nice red tunic with a hole in it.''

''See here, woman, I—''

''See nowhere. To hell with you. Bully did me a good turn now and then and that's a darn sight more than you ever did. Remember that proverb, my pretty, as ye sew,

so shall the buttons stay on. Now run away and gnaw your gums."

Norvice went outside with Endersley, his face a perfect study of chagrin, amazement, and blazing anger.

"Do you believe me *now?*" he barked. "Eh? You watch—I'll get her yet!"

"You'll lose all your bets," murmured Endersley, and went down to find June Royal.

# CHAPTER VIII

Night had fallen over the Bluffs, a night that was filled with soft tinklings of running water and drenched with the aromatic incense of flowers and briars and flowering gums. Cold, gentle wind caresses brought the heavier brew of the pines down on their soft wings from the higher ridges of the Bluffs. A thin star-patch, snow-white, yet barely luminous, hung low in the southwest like a bent sword-blade over the immense volume of Yukon's mighty waters going down grandly to the sea.

Stark and tremendous, the gaunt bulk of the Bluffs towered up into the night, flat and impenetrably black. Here and there along the top ridge a watch-fire winked and flickered where the ragtag and bobtail of the gang hung on with their teeth to their liberty. Over all, like the low note of a mighty organ played on a sonorous minor key, hung the trembling thunder of the ceaseless Falls. It filled the senses with its pulsing power, a sound that seemed to emanate from some deep fissure in the very heart of the world.

Lights burned in the windows of the camp shacks. Judas lights they were, lights that told a deliberate lie to the desperate watchers on the ridge, for Cedar Falls was deserted.

One or two—those whose eyesight barred them from getting behind a gun at night-time—sat in the barroom of the Come Inside and shattered the silence of the night with the choruses of song ballads long since faded from

popular favour in the latitudes down over the brow of the world.

Cod Keppel yowled aloud his own version of "I'll take you home again, Kathleen," and launched out immediately afterwards into "Where the water-lilies grow." Bat Masterson, in a cracked and fearful bass, hit the night with "Sweet Genevieve," and an encore, whose amazingly frequent refrain ended with a dolorous "That's where I laid her in the tomb." A Southern gramophone factory helped considerably, for one of its products screeched appropriate music to the unoffending stars.

Every now and then a door slammed heavily. Piker Jones spent three hours that evening walking round slamming doors. To all intents and purposes Cedar Falls was full and carrying on as usual.

But in every other respect the population of Cedar Falls had completely and silently disappeared. It was, as a matter of fact, slowly scaling the Bluffs, creeping up yard by yard to where the witch-fires winked along the ridge.

Miners who, in the ordinary way, would have left the Mounted to get on with its own job, readily joined in the round-up. They had been irritated and angered by the flying bullets zipping down from the Bluffs whenever they showed their heads. Much glass, too, had been broken in Cedar Falls since the gang first took to the range. And since glass in the Yukon Valley is measured and paid for by the square inch, and since two more little wooden crosses had appeared in the tiny plot of consecrated ground behind the charred Police Post, Norvice had little difficulty in raising an assaulting party when he fixed his plans for the big round-up. Cedar Falls, individually and collectively, was eager.

"Jest you gimme a gun," said Henderson heatedly, "a gun and one of those sons of Magdalen—and I'll—I'll shoot him away from his hair-oil."

Another, who had lost a good harness-dog to a half-spent bullet, growled: "Me? Sure, put me down—and save me six."

The troopers, who had been making a five days' detour to get round behind the Bluffs, were to attack at midnight, crossing over Little Cedar River under cover of darkness. On such an expedition, of course, orders could only be provisional; so, in the event of the assaulting party being surprised as they crawled up the Bluffs, the troopers were to whale in right away, a fusillade of gunfire being counted as sufficient intimation that the fight was on.

Two hours from midnight found the faithful band of decoys in the Come Inside still putting up the bluff of their lives. They had started a shindy. The climbers, high up among the ridges, heard hot words, shouts and yells, leaping in passionate streams from the lighted bars of the Come Inside. On the still, cold night air the sounds carried with startling clarity.

There were only half a dozen of them in there, but from the appalling noise they were making, the Come Inside might well have sheltered the whole articulate population of the Klondike, each one of whom was vociferously endeavouring to demonstrate his own interpretation of the massed effect of a Mexican revolution, the Irish question, and a family affair in a Ghetto. Oaths, howls, catcalls, yells, and scarlet language assaulted the outraged calm of the night.

The brawl soared to a climax on a matter concerning the gramophone. Apparently the musical programme was not

all it might have been. It was giving cause for some slight dissatisfaction among a certain section of the gentlemen in the bar.

A bass voice roared out. "Hey! Masterson; that's the fifteenth time you've played 'Nellie Grey'! Damme, man, what's the game? Shove a new rec'ud in that blasted machine or I'll go flamin' mad!"

"Well, go flamin' mad. Who's stoppin' you?"

"Yow!" howled Cod Keppel. "Me nerves is all rasted up! Change that blambattlin' rec'ud, or, by hell, there'll be red murder aflyin' round this bar t'night!"

"Haw! haw!" boomed an aggressive voice. "You couldn't murder the addled egg of an unborn gnat."

Angry, inflamed voices joined in the hubbub with passionate heat, the six of them taking sides and all of them shouting at once. Bat Masterson's voice swelled out above the rest in a bull-throated roar. "Lissen to me!" he thundered. "I say 'Nellie Grey' is a perfickly good hymn, and what's more, we are going to have her again!"

Out of the din came the wailing screech of Nellie embarking on her sixteenth rotation.

The opposition howled her down.

"I'll not stand for it!" yelled Cod Keppel. "By the blazing powers of fiery hades, I'll not stand for it! That's sixteen times without a break you've let Nell whiz around on that graphnolla, and, by heck, here's where she gets off! I'll—murder—the—brat!"

Bedlam broke loose, a bedlam that was compounded of bellowing voices, stamping boots, bumping bodies, overturning tables, smashing glass—and the crash of a gun. Cod Keppel—whose nerves were "all rasted up"—had reached his breaking point.

In the midst of a mountain of fur-clad bodies which plunged upon him when they saw his hand fly back to his hip, he went down on the floor, madly struggling to get his gun hand free. He wrestled Homerically, striving to unseat the four who sat on him. For a minute the uproar rose to a full-chested crescendo of ear-splitting noise until, with a Herculean effort, he clove a passage between their bodies and thrust his gun through.

In the twinkling of an eye he cocked and, taking a snap-sight, sent a bullet smashing into the soul of the "graphnolla." Incidentally he also sent a bullet smashing into the soul of "Nellie Grey," for that mournfully sweet damozel hiccupped her surprise and gently expired.

Up on the Bluffs Endersley and Norvice were stuffing neckerchiefs into their mouths to stall off the gale of silent laughter that was making their diaphragms ache.

"Land sakes! just listen to those old sweats in the bar!" spluttered Endersley, flat on his face behind a boulder. "You'd think there was a civil war going on down there among a dago-push! Gee, they'd win medals in a dramatic academy."

Norvice gurgled an incoherent reply and pointed downward. "Look at 'em!" he gasped.

The faithful six, rising magnificently to the occasion, put up a last tremendous swindle.

The shooting had, apparently, created a red-raw panic in the Come Inside. Wise men, when the guns were out, either scoot down behind the gin barrels or dig a hole in the skyline. Cedar Falls suddenly appeared to arrive at a true appreciation of the beauties of distance. They poured out of the Come Inside in a yelling cataract.

From the top of the Bluffs all the front aspect of the

saloon was visible and what the watchers on the Bluffs saw was a steady stream of humanity catapulting out of the front entrance of the saloon. Out they galloped, as fast as their legs could carry them. A quick counter, piercing the gloom in the valley, below, could have counted between forty and fifty human thunderbolts hurtling out of that doorway.

But what the watching eyes on the ridge did not see was that the faithful six, on reaching the first clumps of cedar, doubled back at top speed, went in through the rear entrance and shot out again at the front. There followed a prodigious slamming of doors and guttural shouts in the night below. One by one the lights were doused in the cabin windows and anon a vast and comforting silence hung over the valley of Cedar Falls.

Norvice nudged Endersley. "Now watch and see how the old stiffs win out!" he whispered.

The climbers, hidden away like climbing crabs among the rocks, lay and peered up at the summit. One by one the watch-fires faded and died.

Silhouetted against the sky they saw one of the desperadoes scattering his with his feet, stamping on the red-hot embers, before picking up his gun and his bundle and going back to the gang. They had been doing that for the best part of a fortnight.

The rabble up there were in desperate plight. Leaderless, slowly becoming foodless, and with every avenue of escape ceaselessly watched by cold, bitter eyes behind blue-steel guns, their only hope of winning through was to wait until the Law began to climb up the Bluffs for them and to annihilate it as it approached.

But it seemed as though that attack would never ma-

terialize. For yet another night they could coil up in their blankets under the trees and sleep soundly, giving no thought to the hours of darkness. They could rest peacefully, secure in the knowledge that Cedar Falls was sleeping, too.

Sitka Charley was the first one over the summit. As black as a shadow and about as noisy, he had vanished on ahead before the assaulting party had been climbing ten minutes. None of them had seen him or knew where he was by the time they breasted the ridge. All they knew was that Sitka Charley had passed that way—they found the trussed-up body of a sentry, with half a pound of fur stuffed in his mouth, lying beside the burned-out ashes of his fire. They knew it was the Indian who had done it from the way the thumbs were corded to the toes behind his back. He did it in such a way that two minutes of struggling would have started up a cramp in his tendons that would have lasted all night.

In a tense and cautious silence they crawled on over the flat plateau. A quarter of a mile from the ridge they saw the gang's rendezvous. Cooking-fires blazed and crackled in a long line between the rows of trees. Every now and then one of the bunch got up and replenished the fires, flinging great armfuls of cut wood on the fireline from stacks already chopped. The gang was sleeping there, great inanimate bundles of blankets, their heads on their rolled-up fur coats and their feet outstretched to the fires. At painfully frequent intervals a resonant snore rose out of the bundles.

They slept with their boots on and their guns within a palm's breadth of their pillows. One or two, the more

affluent of the gang, had regulation sleeping-bags and they slept soundest.

In the flickering red light of the fireline they saw the outlaw's commissariat, on a tarpaulin sheet under a knot of close-growing pines. Another waterproof sheet was spread over it between the trees, making a cloth roof to their grub. A few sacks of flour and a mound of tinned stuff on the ground, a row of duck, game birds, and a couple of haunches of deer meat pendent on the branches, completed the outfit. Pots, billy-cans, and flapjack pans, unwashed and half-rusty, were chucked about round the fires. An attempt had been made to bring fresh water down by means of a narrow trench from Little Cedar River half a mile away, but the project had been abandoned either because it entailed too much hard work or because the galoots had realized that the water would have continued to flow once the trench was cut, until it flooded them out of the cup.

The Law, with sixty guns in its hand, crawled right down to the trees. There was a nerve-wrecking pause for a couple of minutes when one of the bunch, restive or suspicious, reared up on his elbow and peered around. It was at that moment that Endersley, at the end of the line, had begun to walk forward. He could not check his footstep. His boot came down with a soft crunch on a patch of withered leaves. The suspicious one whipped round, staring over his shoulder in the direction of the sound.

There are moments when man's wits function with the lightning rapidity of a god's, when the human brain lifts itself high above every other miracle of creation. Such

a moment had slid with silent suddenness into the life of Robert Endersley.

When the ruffian, shading his eyes from the glare of the fire with his spread hand, rolled over and peered intently down the firelight at him, Robert Endersley experienced a sickening pull in the pit of his stomach. And at that moment his brain functioned with such an inspired efficiency that Robert Endersley became a brain and little else.

Mechanically, almost without realizing his own movements, he clumped over the woodpile and staggered back with half a sawn-off pine tree on his shoulder. Without a glance at the man under the blanket, he dumped it on the fire. Another and another followed. For one terrific minute there was no Robert Endersley at all, but just a brain-thought with a body attached, a brain-thought that walked and carried chunks of young pine from the woodpile to the fireline.

When he looked round again, the outlaw had turned over on his side and was dozing off again.

Endersley felt as though his body had suddenly come back to him. He put a hand up to his clammy forehead and began edging back toward the trees. He was mad with himself for having landed himself in the mess. His had been a premature advance that might have ruined the whole arrangement, though he certainly thought the rest of the attacking party was moving forward with him.

Halfway back to cover he stopped like a frozen rabbit. One of the outlaws, motionless in his swaddling of blankets, was gazing up at him with curious, wide-open eyes. The man was obviously only half-awake, trying hard to come back to earth. His brows were wrinkling with puzzlement as he gazed up at the stranger's face. Endersley

just stood and stared, his wits letting him down with a thud. There was absolutely nothing else to do; he was cornered. A single motion of his gun hand would have set the whole place alight.

And then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw another object that held him for a brief, thrilling second—a rounded doubled-up figure that was crawling toward the outlaw with amazing silence from the opposite fringing of trees. Black and noiseless as a thought it was. There was a gun in its hand and a bold white band round its forehead.

What followed happened in a desperately short span of magnificent second, but it happened with all the tense, dreadful slowness of a slow-motion film.

The outlaw blinked twice and rubbed his right eye, blinked again, and stared at Endersley with the growing consciousness of dawning reality. He lay flat on his back with his right arm on his chest and the other thrown back under his head. Then his face suddenly twitched and a startled look of understanding shot into his eyes. For a second he lay as rigid as the earth itself. Then slowly and with sinister deliberation his right hand began to move over his left shoulder toward his gun. The two of them stared each other eye to eye without a quiver or a motion save that of the gaunt bronzed hand creeping out to the gun; and the Indian crawling on as inexorably and silently as the hand itself.

The outlaw's gun was lying on the grass beside his head. Without taking his eyes off Endersley's staring face, he groped about on the ground for it. Twice he almost touched it. The Indian got to within a yard of the outlaw's head and his arm went quietly out toward the gun.

The outlaw's hand nearly collided with the Indian's as the thin brown fingers flexed on it and lifted it. Tiny as the noise was, the man heard it, the rustle of grass in his ear.

He jerked round bodily and found himself staring point-blank up the muzzles of two guns, his own and Sitka Charley's. They were pointing without a flicker dead into his eyeballs.

Sitka Charley bent over the outlaw's ear and stuck a gun in the other. "You move, I shoot. You speak, I shoot," he hissed.

The remainder of that round-up came as near to touching the fringe of the ridiculous as anything also touching life and death well could. The hollow basin of the rendezvous was suddenly alive with crawling figures—figures that crawled with their faces and breasts pressed close to the earth and their fingers on the triggers of their guns.

Endersley turned to the next recumbent figure. He was a dark, heavily bearded man who breathed stertorously through his lips. There was a gun at his head and another tucked into his blankets. While Endersley was taking possession of them, he let out a terrific snore, muttered fretfully in his sleep and clicked his teeth together. Endersley could have laughed aloud at the comic absurdity of it. He broke open the automatics, emptied the magazines, and replaced the guns in their original positions.

So it was going on down the whole windward length of the fireline. Josh Henderson rounded up five guns himself, unloaded them, and put them back with delectable circumspection. It was comedy pure and simple, dancing about on the hair-spring of tragedy. Norvice didn't like it a bit—he had a report to make out when the job was through—but the miners were doing the job in their own

way. They owed that gang a mighty big packet for the offensive fortnight they had spent under their gunfire and, so far as they could pull the strings, the means were going to do justice to the end.

Norvice whispered to Endersley; Endersley whispered to the Sitka, and the Sitka slid away into the opposite fringe of trees to get the troopers.

Within five minutes every bullet had been extracted and the weapons restored. Like black spectres on a vast tapestry of green and gold and black the miners crawled back to cover, leaving Norvice standing, a solitary figure in the red glare of the firelight, his scarlet tunic and blue riding-breeches a blaze of colour against the sombre background of the trees; the badges and buttons of his uniform flashing out in splashes of gold fire to the play of the flames.

Henderson chuckled in the bushes. "The Mounted is collecting its own washing," he whispered, "but, just in case—hands on your shooters, boys!"

They played their comedy through. Suddenly, from the gloom beyond the fireline there came the most appalling howl that ever startled the Northern night. It sounded like ten thousand agonized coyotes being eaten alive by ten thousand dying hyenas, in full view of ten thousand tethered and starving wolves. The row the faithful six had kicked up in the Come Inside earlier on was a gentle study in tranquil silence compared with the stomach-sinking screech that leapt from those sixty men in the bushes.

Its effect was electrical. The rendezvous erupted. Endersley, behind the woodpile, with his hands holding his aching sides, had a hazy, kaleidoscopic impression of thirsty mounds of blankets suddenly ballooning and bursting in the air; of maddened, panicky bodies hurtling out of them;

of brawny arms grabbing madly at useless guns; of a ludicrous tattoo of clicking triggers and snapping strikers; of a whole line of amazed and incredulous desperadoes playing their forefingers like men possessed; of blank faces and eyes opening wide with absolute unbelief, as the strikers clicked on empty chamber after empty chamber; of the looks of transcendental stupefaction with which they gazed into the useless barrels of their weapons; of the helpless, hopeless astonishment with which they gazed at the forbidding figure in red who regarded them with icy contempt and said, "The class will now stand up and face the blackboard."

In each hand he held a bunch of steel that glinted blue in the firelight. He stood, with legs apart and jaws tight, swaying slowly as he covered the gang.

Desperadoes in *déshabillé* cut a sorry figure. Some were kneeling, some sitting, some squatting, and a few standing, all within a few feet of their own portable bedrooms and all looking very unruffianly minus their great furs and squirrel-skin hats. Only the blazing fury in their eyes showed the measure of passionate fury that was bottled up in their hearts. The sudden jolt from peaceful slumber into wide-eyed wakefulness and desperate danger had shaken them to their toes. The ease and contemptuous manner of their capture flamed hotter in their souls than the pine wood in the fire line. For a long, uncomprehending minute they fully believed they had been corralled by one man, the upstanding leather-faced devil in a red tunic who held sovereignty over them on the merits of a brace of dour great Colts.

"Stand up!"

Those who weren't already on their feet sullenly reared

up, their eyes fixed on the Mounted man in a glare of animal hate. The more reckless of them began edging in toward each other.

They argued that there were over thirty of them there—and that Norvice's Colts only provided for fourteen. There were guttural, profane whisperings among them. They turned their heads to reconnoitre the chances of a quick jump through the fireline and a dash down the Bluffs. They turned—and gasped.

They noticed for the first time that they were ringed around by a circle of dark, bitter-lined faces; faces that stared grimly at them from behind the wall of the fire, the light flashing red in their purposeful eyes. It occurred to them that a miracle must have happened. Cedar Falls appeared to have come up *en bloc,* in a lift. It was all as amazing and incomprehensible as that other disgraceful bit of sorcery—the guns that wouldn't bark.

The miners "took it out of them" to their hearts' content. They were mocking, sarcastic, derisive, and prophetic by turns.

"Thar'll be a fine run on pine trees and ropes in a coupla days," declared Josh Henderson hopefully. "A grand sight you'll look, all the hull regiment of you, ten feet higher than you are now: yep, sure!"

Two of them took the one chance in a thousand. They made a wild, reckless dash for the trees. Norvice fired once from the hip and one of them dropped, his eyes squinting a helpless reaction to the terrible thing that had happened to his head. The other one got six yards farther on, and a line of bullets leapt out of the trees to meet him. He spun round twice with the concussion of it, swayed on his heels, and toppled.

"Don't—don't shoot 'em, Sarge," pleaded Henderson. "I want to see 'em rise! One of them goshwollickin' hoodlums put a bullet through a bar'l of my whiskey last night and it came out of the door to meet me this mornin'. For the love of Mike, don't shoot 'em!"

Norvice motioned the troopers out of the trees. Deftly they searched the whole bunch and piled their barren armoury in a heap. Norvice threw the whole lot, bowies as well, into the blazing fireline. Then he marshalled them into a single file and started them off down the Bluffs.

"Take 'em away!" he said to the troopers. "Put 'em in the cellar for the night, shove a couple of tree-trunks over the slab and mount a guard till I come down. I'll get 'em up to Dawson in the morning. Two of you will come back when you've corralled 'em, and pick up my trail at Little Cedar River. I'm going to have a cut at Magain, Haines, and Coldwater Griff. You'll probably pick me up somewhere down by the Falls. Any of you other boys care to come along and pull your weight, we ought to make a hundred per cent job of it before the sun shows."

# CHAPTER IX

Norvice, Endersley, and Sitka Charley, together with a good dozen of the Cedar Falls boys, set out at a quick stride for Little Cedar River, while the remainder, lustily singing "I'll take you home again, Kathleen," added themselves as escorts to the prisoners going back down the Bluffs.

"It's like this," said Norvice, when they got to the Falls, "the leaders of that bunch of tripe have got a cubby-hutch somewhere around here where, as the poet says, they can see and not be seen. We'd best scatter. Each of you take an area and beat it right up. One from any of you will bring the whole crowd of us jumping around."

Right where they stood the world rose up a storey. On their eye level the broad plateau of the Bluffs went back in a great, ever-rising sweep to the Challifont, Timber, and Nahoni Mountains. Below them the whole panorama of the Yukon Valley fell away to the skyline, with the mammoth waterway coiling and sweeping through it like a flat, two-mile-wide thoroughfare done in shining white satin. Into it thundered the descending volume of Little Cedar River, a broad, tumultuous sheet of falling waters, noisy and phosphorescent in the dim glow of the night.

All through the night they searched, beating and quartering over every yard of the steep landfall. Quick eyes, clear brains, instincts trained to notice the oddities of the wild on many a long and venturesome trail, hunted and harried among the crags and woods and chaotic declivities. The stars paled and the sun came up, blood red

in the mists of the morning, and they went over the ground again. But hunt as they would, trail as they could, there was neither sight nor sound of the vanished leaders.

Norvice sat down under a great boulder and scratched his head.

"My boys can't have been sending down dud information," he said testily. "They've actually seen Haines hanging around here. And then Nell—she said she knows where their place is."

Endersley said: "Yep. B'gosh. And I'm unconditionally hungry. And Cedar Falls is a disgracefully long way—"

He broke off abruptly. A voice, an earnest, urgent, feminine voice had broken in hurriedly upon his declamation. He looked round in surprise, his eyes scanning the boulders and bushes in the vicinity.

"Sergeant! Don't move; for the love of mercy, if you want to live, don't move!" The voice rushed the words out in a hot, tempestuous stream. "You two mad fools! I told you about that boulder! Don't! Don't stand, Norvice, or you're mutton!"

Endersley made a crouching jump at Norvice's gun hand. "Don't make a fool of yourself!" he said angrily. Norvice was glaring at a boulder a few yards away and pulling out his gun.

Behind the boulder, flat down, they saw the head and shoulders of Nell o' the Dance Halls, her face upturned to them and her eyes fixed on Norvice in a look of desperate warning. And Endersley, in his clearer understanding, saw more than mere warning in her brown eyes.

"Shooting *me* won't do *you* any good," she went on quickly. "What in the name of hell's bells did you want

to go and start muckin' about round *that* brickbat for? Wasn't there hundreds of others you could have chose?'' Norvice looked round him and noted for the first time that he had been taking an easy under the great rock Nell had warned him against. In some little mortification he glared at the girl, a string of savage questions jostling about in his head. He made a movement as though to rise and get her, but Endersley turned the trick. He grabbed him, seized his gun, and pitched it ten yards away into the bushes. ''Just get the heat out of your head,'' he growled irritatedly. ''I'll give this rock a chance to prove Nell out.''

Norvice, white-faced, looked good for murder.

Endersley took his hat, stuck it on a dead branch, and slowly pushed it a few inches above the top of the boulder. Something hit the branch-top with a soft WHUCK!—and when he lowered it again there were two neat holes drilled in the crown of his hat.

That was all. Not a sound; not the sigh nor the breath of a sound; nothing, except the impact of the bullet. Just an uncanny silence and two holes in his hat.

He tried again, from the side, and without a whisper of sound there were four holes in the hat crown.

Norvice looked at the girl oddly. He pursed his lips and stared away down into the wide valley. ''Right, Nell,'' he said gently. ''That levels up for a whole lot!''

''Land sakes!'' she gasped; ''don't start climbing down off that high horse, for the love of Mike. You look best with your nose in the air.''

Norvice was silent for a few seconds and then began snapping a shower of questions at her.

''At it agen, at it agen!'' she complained. ''All the

world must be one great question mark to you, honey. Now, lissen. I'll tell you all I know without you askin' questions. Miss Royal hasn't let you down—she's up here somewhere lookin' for you with me. Haines was seen in the village last night. Sure! Think I couldn't recognize his ugly mug a mile off through a fog? He'd come down after me. June spotted him and we cleared out to put you wise. He musta seen Cedar Falls empty itself up the Bluffs. The boys got the gang down all right. They got 'em jammed down in that mud cellar with half a spinney piled on top o' the slab. And everything is quiet on the boulevards. Say, cully, the best thing youse can do is to slide away from that bit of grit as fast as your hands and knees can carry you. Them silent bullets can keep it up, intermittent like, all day!''

Endersley half rose, but sat back with a jerk. A shout that rose to his lips was choked back with a violent effort.

Two figures, each unaware of the other's presence, had emerged, almost simultaneously, from the trees.

Norvice gasped. Both he and Endersley saw the tragedy of it in the same helpless flicker of time.

The one to the left was June Royal. She was smiling and waving her hand to them gaily as she caught sight of them under the boulder. And all unconsciously she was running into a direct line with the trajectory of the silent bullets. Dumfounded, they sat and stared, half-expecting to see her topple and fall at every step she took.

And neither of them dared utter a sound or call of warning. For June Royal was standing between two certain deaths. The shock and horror of it held them speechless while June tripped daintily on into the line of the silent bullets.

For the other figure that had appeared, farther round the angle of the stone, nonchalantly swinging his gun in his hand and gazing down into the face of the sheeting Falls, was Bill Haines, blissfully unaware of any one's presence save his own.

June Royal with sparkling eyes and lips full of dancing smiles ran unsuspiciously on. She half-opened her mouth to cry a merry greeting to them, utterly oblivious of the yelling warning in their faces.

As she came right into the flight-line of the silent bullets there happened one of those insignificant little incidents of the every day which, for all their seeming littleness, nevertheless make up the great big whirl of life and death. June's moccasin lace came untied and trailed round her ankle.

With a little gesture of annoyance she slipped down on one knee to refasten the thong. A fraction of a second after her head went down out of range, Endersley heard the horrible whine of a death bullet drone by overhead.

Haines, approaching the rock from the opposite angle, passed from the vision of the two men crouching under the boulder. Endersley was tugging frantically at his own gun, struggling to disentangle the foresight, which, by some exasperating kink in the holster, had got hooked up in the buckle.

Haines and June Royal caught sight of each other in a simultaneous, breath-gripping flash. The outlaw stopped in his stride for one pulsing second and stared at her. Then his ugly lips thickened into a venomous grin as he clicked back the safety-catch of his gun.

June, on one knee, looked up at him with hunted, desperate eyes. She hadn't time to think. Haines had that

in his eyes which told her of vicious, wanton death in the gun, uncorked and quivering for the jump-out. When a situation smashes into one's life in which time-margins for thought have been reduced out of existence, the brain jolts back to the usages of instinct, and the oldest and strongest of them all is self-preservation. With a single snap-fire movement of her right arm, June Royal whipped out her gun and fired.

It all happened in a flicker of an eyelid. It didn't seem possible for her to have had time to get even half a sight of the flight of her bullet. A grab and a click and a crack. That was all. But Haines toppled; he threw up his hands, his gun flying high over his head in a wide shining arc. One hand clutched madly at his head as he fell, a sprawled-out figure between the girl and the boulder.

For a moment she looked dully at the body. All the sparkle and fire had gone from her eyes. She was frightened and awed by the horror of the thing the fates had made her do. Then she covered her face with her hands, the gun falling with a clatter unheeded to her side.

Endersley began crawling toward her on all fours, away from the boulder of death. "It's all right, lassie," he called softly. "I shouldn't let that worry you. He asked for all he got—went down on his knees and asked for it. Sakes, lassie, it wasn't your fault."

But even while he spoke the words, he knew they could be but cold comfort to a girl just realizing the first shock of having sent a man to his doom. It is not a nice thought, even under such helpless circumstances, to know that by one single act of yours you have rent the curtain for a fellow human and sent his soul prospecting out among

the shadows. There is a horror, a grimness about opening up the trail to the Long Drop for any man, even one with a price on his murderous head.

He got to the body and looked at it. Haines was not a prepossessing individual even in life. There was a blanket strapped to his back and Endersley unlashed it. He spread it out to cover the huddled figure. As he was pulling it up over the head, he stopped and stared. Then he wheeled round to the girl.

"June! June!" he said. "Look up and smile, lassie. Haines never dropped to any bullet of yours! Look! He was facing you dead square, eye to eye, when you pulled on him. You missed him. Lassie, you couldn't have done it. Haines got his clean behind the ear. The gang blundered; they dropped their own pard. Haines stopped one of the silent bullets."

June looked up with quick relief in her eyes. Endersley felt almighty proud of her at that moment, for he knew that, in spite of the sincerity of her relief, she would have risen to a courage sufficient to draw and shoot again, were the need as dire.

He was at her side with his arm round her shoulders whispering to her those tender little assurances that pass almost silently between lover and loved, when Norvice suddenly interrupted them with a shout.

"Gosh, Endersley, I've tumbled to their game!" he yelled. "Quick! Gimme your gun. Hi, you, Nell, chuck me my gun outa that bush. I'll give those coyotes silent bullets! Won't I just! I'll mark time on their souls with whizzin' nickel. Endersley, we must be either blind or daft not to have hit it before."

He caught the gun that Nell threw him and crawled

out to the right-hand edge of the boulder. Shading his eyes with his hat, he stared out across the tumbling chaos of waters thundering into the Yukon. With his gun outthrust through the grasses, flat on his face he began pumping round after round into the very face of the Falls. Clip after clip he blazed at the sheeting downpour, while Endersley turned and stared at him in amazement.

"What—what's biting you?" he yelled back, and then went flat on his face again as another silent bullet whanged murderously past his ear.

The mounted man turned and regarded him with a cheerful grin. "Come over here," he said. "Come and take a look for yourself."

Endersley crawled back to the boulder, craned his neck round the lower left-hand angle of the granite mass, and peered cautiously across at the Falls.

"See there? Near the middle and about halfway up," he heard the Sergeant's directing voice. "See where that lump of rock on the crest of the Falls splits the stream? Like a gash in a curtain, a black slit about two foot wide."

"Yes, I've got you."

"Well, that's where those silent bullets are coming from. Reckon there must be a ledge or a shelf back there behind the Falls. The river swings over in a curve making an air space of, maybe, ten or a dozen feet between the wall and the water. Those hoodlums have got some sort of a cabin shelter on that ledge, and they can shoot out through that gap in the Falls. They command all the landscape in a line with that gap, and the roar of the Falls drowns the crack of their guns. Get me?"

"Yes, I get you. But how the devil do they get down there?"

"Heh! If the answer to that one was as simple as askin' it, they wouldn't be in there."

The shooting had brought the whole crowd of the Cedar Falls boys running in from the areas farther out. Norvice kept up a steady drumfire into the gap in the Falls, while Endersley shouted warnings to the boys to keep out of the line of fire on the boulder.

Soon there was half a dozen automatics spitting viciously into the slit in the Falls, and after a while Norvice tried the hat experiment again. He held it up along the ridge of the boulder at a dozen different angles, but there was not even the sign of a bullet hole in the crown when he drew it down.

"Well, that's the end of that!" he muttered, and stood up.

A twentieth of a second later he was down again with a bullet hole in the crown of his hat.

"Hell!" he said wrathfully. "This looks like being a long firm job."

Josh Henderson came creeping up.

"What's the big idea, Sarge?" he asked. "Shootin' a brace of salmon for breakfast? Bright, but salmon don't jump that high. And, anyways, the salmon won't be comin' up-river for another eight months. Why not try fishin'—for eggs?"

Norvice grinned, and called a hurried council.

"Look here, boys," he said. "Magain and Coldwater Griff are back there behind those Falls, potshootin' at everything that shows up ten yards either side of this boulder. The roar of the Falls kills the sound of their guns,

and there's been a grand selection of dumb epitaphs whizzin' around here this last five minutes. Bill Haines stopped one—he's that lump of mutton down there under the horse blanket. But the other two are penned in there behind the Falls as full of fight as water-bugs. And I want 'em! Gee, don't I want 'em! And there's no reason why I shouldn't get 'em. We've skinned that gang down to its last two guns, and I'll finish 'em or bust."

"It'll be a long job, Norvice."

"You said it. They've got some hidden communication tunnel to that ledge and we can't find it. It's probably one that comes to the surface in a clump of bushes. Anyway, we've hunted all night for it and haven't struck scent of it, so it seems as though we shall have to starve 'em out. I'll get the troopers and the rest of the boys up here, and we'll just keep on picketing the whole locality till they say it with a white flag. Those hoodlums have probably got a stock of canned grub in there, but we'll get 'em if I have to stay here till the freeze-up locks the Falls solid."

"Wal, they sure won't go short of water," opined Henderson, gazing across at the tumbling volumes crashing over. "I'm going back to Cedar Falls before noon; I'll send the boys up, or as many as care about it. Yer redcoats can manage all right during daylight, but you'll want half the village picketed up here after dark."

"Right, kid. But I'll want you up here for a bit. I'll get Nell to go back for the boys. Hey, Nell!"

"Hello!"

"Say, will you go back—it's a hurry call—and round up the boys in—"

"Not me, honey. You run your own damn errands."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"I ain't on the Mounted pay-roll."

There was a titter of laughter from the bunch, and Norvice swallowed. "Is that it?" he said.

"That's it, laddie, as sure as you've got a hole in your hat."

The Mounted man bit his lip. "Well," he muttered, "I'm not blaming you, not on that count. Sorry I asked you. I wasn't trying to be high-handed. I was just asking a favor."

"Well, don't. My memory goes back longer than twenty-four hours."

"As you wish. I know where I stand." Norvice's voice suddenly snapped fire. "See here, you've been down in that hut under the Falls, haven't you?"

"Heh, heh! It's been my week-end bungalow, off and on."

Norvice leaned over and gripped her arm.

"Then you know the way down," he growled.

"Well, y' don't suppose an angel took me down in my sleep, do you?"

"I—I—I wish you were a man!"

"I've wished that myself, laddie, more times than you can count up to. Leggo my arm! I'm all bruises now where you've mauled me."

"Where—is—that—passage?"

"If I was a man I'd go and find it!"

Norvice breathed hard. "Nell," he said, doggedly, "you're going to tell me where that tunnel is or—or you're going to join up that bunch going up to Dawson to-morrow."

"Is that straight stuff?"

"Dead sure, Nell."

The dance girl looked at him good and hard for many seconds. There was a wistful defiance in her shrewd eyes.

"All right, then, I'll tell you," she said. "I always get down to the ledge this way. I get in a canoe about half a mile back up the Little Cedar, and I paddle her out to midstream. Then I let the current take me till I get to the edge of the Falls, where I gives one loud hellup of fright and over I go. Bully catches me halfway down; he leans outa the shack door with a tea-tray in his hand and I land blam on it."

A roar of laughter greeted her sally.

"And, please, Sergeant," she finished acidly, "can I have a horse for that journey up to Dawson? I'd hate to be seen walking in that low company."

Norvice was white to the temples. Added to all his bottled-up admiration for the dance girl's ratlike courage, and the savage knowledge that she had scored all along the line that morning, was the still more heart-breaking knowledge that he was doing his job. A Mounted man carries but three things in his mental knapsack—his job, his honor, and the welfare of his horse—and when on trail he carries them to the exclusion of all else. And Norvice, full of a deep and bitter self-hate for doing it, stuck to his job.

"Nell," he said quietly, "this is your last chance. Where does that tunnel head come up?"

"Aw! Gimme Dawson."

"Is that final?"

"Yep. I won't tell you nothing more than this—you keep your eyes peeled all the minutes there are. You're

up against two killers. Say, d'ye think they plugged Haines by mistake? Huh! And they'd already been sighting on you? You take it from me, policeman, they plugged Bill sooner than he should save his own dirty skin by showin' you the way down to that ledge! Sure, they're killers all right. The rest I'll tell the judge."

That was the flat finality of it. Norvice saw the uselessness of further arguments, realized the futility of threats. Nell's code of honor was a thing born of the dance halls, a weird hybrid of high courage and absurd integrity, and Norvice knew she would stand by its tenets though she went to the Pen for a lifer.

The Cedar Falls bunch had followed the duel of wills with jocular amusement, and they looked to the Mounted man to make the next move. They sat there, waiting, expectant, with smiles in their eyes.

But whatever Norvice thought, whatever he intended doing, he kept it to himself. He just nodded to her curtly.

"All right, have it your own way," he said. "You'd best get down into Cedar Falls. Won't be much use *you* trying to cut and run. I'd hook you back inside two hours." He looked over at the boss of the Come Inside. "Henderson, you'll have to do that little commission for me," he said. "Send 'em all up. Tell 'em we've got the last of the gang where they can't do nothin' but squeal. We'll skin 'em cold to-night."

But they did no such thing. The two outlaws trapped in behind the roaring Falls fought like blue devils. They held on to their last stronghold with the reckless desperation of animals. All day and half the night bullets

hummed round the boulder if so much as a bit of gorse swayed in the wind.

Norvice set his outposts with a skill born of his years in the backwoods. He posted them so that every yard of scrub, every patch of bush, and every clump of trees within half a mile of the Falls was covered by guns from two different angles.

During the days that followed there was an amazing toll of death among all things that moved in the woods. A live thing had only to show itself or betray its presence with a sound for the bullets to crack into it until all movement was knocked out of it. Jack-rabbits, mountain cats, pumas, badgers, pine-martens, blue fox, skunk—Cod Keppel actually got a mink—stoats, and the whole family of slinkers along the ground. And the birds, too, darker patches on the brown of the coverts, paid toll with their lives for the foolishness of moving.

It was not a mere wanton slaughter: the guns spoke as soon as the eyes behind them saw a flicker of life in the undergrowth. Cod Keppel's mink might just as easily have been Magain's beaver coat skulking up out of the tunnel head. Masterson's little puma might just as easily have been Coldwater Griff's fox fur cap crawling through the bushes.

Those who weren't actually posted as lookouts took up positions behind the giant boulder and poured an intermittent tattoo of lead into the gap in the Falls.

And all the casualities fell to the vicious precision of the bullets whipping out from the water-wall. Day after day they kept it up. Two of the redcoats went down with bullets in their chests; they paid the penalty for showing themselves too freely at night. One of them recovered

later in a hospital up at Dawson, but the other died in Pierre Bonard's arms in the Mission at Cedar Falls. Norvice was present at the bedside, and when the old minister drew the sheet softly over the trooper's head he just stared at the coverlet while the Baptist lighted the candles on the little altar. When he looked up, Endersley saw the eyes of a tiger glaring out of the Mounted man's head. They seemed dark and hot with blazing passion of hate, and his hands were twitching at his sides.

"Endersley," he said, "I'll—take—those—devils—*alive!*" That was all he said, but he spoke as difficultly as though a semi-paralysis had gripped his jaws. Endersley watched him walk unsteadily out of the dim-lit Mission, his hat twisted to a rag in his bony fingers.

Four others were wounded before the siege was raised, four of the Cedar Falls boys. Kelly, a Mayo man, got one in the hip so badly that on that great day when he slammed five pegs down on the Endersley strike, he took five days longer than any other leg-lifter getting down to the Gold Recorders.

Magain himself proved the quality of his recklessness one dawn by standing full view in the gap and blazing away at the Law in open defiance of its minions under the rock. He openly and blatantly defied his fate. Desperate to the point of lunacy, he just stood and emptied a whole magazine at the boulder. His figure vanished again a second before a flying stream of lead flailed into the gap from the Cedar Falls boys, who for a good half-minute had been too amazed to get their gun hands up.

June and Endersley went back into the village. Endersley still had the greater part of his outfit to get together, and the winter was drawing on apace. The nights

grew bitterly cold. A numbing, razor-like nip crept into the winds, and the winds themselves swung slowly back round the compass from southeast to northwest. In four days the mosquitoes died. The thousands and millions of them that had plagued existence in the out-of-doors were obliterated as the winds went round. The grass midges survived a day longer. But on that day the thermometer touched down to freezing point for the first time, with the sun above the horizon. And the next morning there were no grass midges.

It is a bad season to catch on the Klondike, the season that slips in like a thin sliver between summer and winter. It is the quick throttling of a mammoth country, the death-like garroting of all life and love in the wild. The geese and the duck went hurriedly back beyond dim horizons, making their going known by a steady swishing through the night; and the last of the rains fell with a pipe-like droning in the dawn. The small birds went on before, and the creeks began to shrink—the waterline dropped inch by inch in the beds. And all around in land and sky the stark hand of winter wrote the fierce message of its coming; wrote it on the gaunt poles of the fir and pine, on the stripped lacework of spruce and larch, on the dry crackled skeletons of the undergrowth; wrote it on the frost-hung gauze of the morning air, on the cold white light of the midnight stars—on the snowline crawling farther down the mountains every day.

On a day there came the first faint powderings of snow along the trails and summer ponds, and little blue lakes were brittle with ice by the time the aurora ceased its wonder-dances on the wall of the Northern night.

Endersley had finished buying his gear and was waiting

on tenterhooks for the moment to make his jump. He was shadowed day and night not only by the old-timers in Cedar Falls, but by the agent of the Skagway syndicate, who dogged him with a grim purposefulness that told him he would have to fight for every inch of his ground. For a couple of days he had been up at the Falls with Norvice watching the last stages of the fight with Griff and Magain.

"Holding out well, drat 'em aren't they?" said Endersley, squinting out from behind the boulder.

"Running short of ammunition," commented the Mounted man. "Maybe their grub's giving out too, but they've been mighty chary about loosing off their guns lately. Only ten shots to-day, twelve yesterday. I reckon they're about all in."

"Hope you're right. I'd like to see 'em landed before I head north."

"Sure thing. You'll be going soon, won't you?"

"Any day now. Any hour."

"Come over to the shack. I want a word with you, Endersley."

They crawled away from the boulder and walked to the shack that the outlaws had used occasionally at the head of the Falls. It was the same shack that had housed Sitka Charley's first encounter with Magain on that unkind day when Bully discovered several traits in the Indian character he never dreamed existed. Charley had rediscovered the shack in the first survey after the capture of Magain's gang. Norvice had half-hoped to find the tunnel head in or near that shack, but a critical search over every yard of the ground showed that, wherever it was, the gang had been too cute to build a shack anywhere near it.

Norvice kicked the door open and went in. Endersley followed and saw him pull out a small square packet from his breast pocket. There was a strained, worried look on the Mounted man's face as he opened out the packet, and his lips were pressed into a thin bitter line that made him look more than ever like a young-old he-hawk of the mountains. He laid on the table a letter and a charred, half-burnt proclamation parchment with three bullet holes between the eyes of three blackened faces portrayed thereon.

"Endersley," he said, "I want to talk to you about several things, and this is one of them." He pointed to the bullet holes. "I did that. I did it publicly. And in doing so I chucked my honour on the table for a gamble. D'you get me? The money's down and the ball's jumping. Either I take Magain and Griff, or—I'm through with the Mounted."

"You'll get 'em all right. What's the matter—losing your nerve?"

Norvice clicked his teeth and looked sourly at the gold prospector. "Not on muck like that," he growled. "Listen. I'm dead serious. I may not be alive to talk to you after I leave this shack, and there's a few things I've got to get square. One thing I must ask you. I've just had it down from headquarters that you've made arrangements to cross the Boundary. Is that so?"

"Accurate information, Ralph, but don't blab it around the Territories, for the love of Mike."

"Very well, now. I'm not going to ask you for the dead reckonings of your strike—that knowledge would start up too strong an itch in my own feet—but what I do ask you is this, is it on American or Canadian ground?"

"Yankee. A hundred miles beyond the border."

"Hell!"

"What are you laughing at?"

"Gosh, man, don't you see? My uniform don't operate a yard beyond the Canadian line!"

"You should worry!"

"Worry! If I don't corral those two hounds alive, if they manage to wriggle out of that rat-trap, I'm finished —back-numbered by a couple of skunks I ought to have gaoled years ago. I'll have to send my stripes in. Gee, Endersley, I'll have to get 'em if I have to trail 'em over five-fifths of Alaska. See, you, a Mounted man is prouder of his job than a king of his first-born. I must get 'em I *must*. I'll be the laugh in every gin-bar from Norton Sound to Hudson's Bay if I don't."

Norvice was breathing hard. He glared at Endersley as though he had committed a grievous sin in finding gold in American territory.

"I can't see that I can help you," said Endersley. "I want an hour with those devils myself. There's some long debts outstanding between them and me, and they're all down for payment in a gunless square-up."

"That won't help me any," said Norvice. "I want 'em where the rest of the gang are. If they get clear, you'll have to help me keep track of 'em till I can get out this uniform and get along out on trail."

"Oh-h-h," said Endersley in a long breath. "So that's what's biting, is it?"

"That's it. If they slip me, I swear right here and now to quit the Force until I've roped 'em in. They're going to get what the rest of the bunch got."

"And that was?"

"Fifteen years solid. Every blamed one of them. Had the notification down from Dawson this forenoon."

"Did that include Nell?" Endersley asked the question with his eyelids half-closed.

Norvice looked at him oddly, and the temper went out of his voice.

"No," he muttered. "Nell wasn't included. She cleared. Nell was—you see—oh, well, I gave her the plain word to fade out of it and she cleared."

"You've been almighty rough on that kid, Norvice."

"I know it. How could I help it? The Mounted ain't a man, it's a machine."

"Blaming the job?"

"I've done the job by *you*," said Norvice, reddening.

"That's a herring, and a red one."

Norvice flared up. "What are you calling me down for?" he demanded. "The job has outnumbered me right from the start. You've got to be a brute in the Mounted or resign. If Magain and Griff get clear, I'll still blame Nell for it, but only God Himself knows how near I've been to slinging in my papers when I've had to serve out rough-stuff to that brat. Sometimes only those bullet holes kept the colour of my coat red."

"Ralph, old kid, I can almost see your way of looking at it. Nell was a wrong 'un, but she was a good wrong 'un. And you were vicious. More than vicious; you were cruel to her. And on my code there is only one sin, in all the decalogues of all the world, that never did have, and never will have, an excuse, and that sin is cruelty—whether to animal or human. You tripped up badly over Nell; you let your own piffling self-respect trample on your own honour."

Norvice sat on the edge of the table and picked up the letter. He looked at Endersley square in the eyes. "I owe Nell but one apology," he said stiffly. "It's here in this letter. Nothing more than an admission that I was wrong about her in one thing, and—er—a word of thanks for risking her life to come up here and warn me about that boulder. I wouldn't worry you at all in this matter, but I'd like Nell to get it."

Endersley took the letter from him in silence and put it in an inside pocket in his furs.

"In a couple of hours' time I shall probably be a dead man," went on Norvice quietly. "I've got an idea I know where that tunnel head comes up, and I'm going to walk over and take a look. The chances are a hundred to one that I'll be flattened out as soon as I see it, but I'll have time before my light goes out to sing out either yes or no. And that'll be enough for my boys. The only place we haven't searched yet is just that twenty square yards we haven't *been able* to search—the little patch of ground in front of that boulder between the rock and the side of the drop. The silent bullets command it, and, as I say, I may only last a handful of seconds after I leave the shelter of that boulder. But it's there where the tunnel head comes up, I'll swear my life on it, and I'm going to have a look. Will you call me down on *that* to a point of self-respect and honour?"

Endersley set his teeth hard.

Norvice stood up. "You'll be hitting the outward bound for the big Northwest before many more suns are up," he said. "You'll meet Nell. Your trails are bound to cross. She knows where your strike is, and she's sure to head up that way to be in the thick of it when the fun

starts. If my number goes up when I leave that boulder, I'd like you to keep that letter and give it to her. Aye, and tell her, if you care, that I handed in my checks because she was too damn self-righteous to pull a string on a crowd of murderers. If the one chance in a hundred comes off and I come back from that boulder with the breath still in me, give me that letter back.

"There's one other thing—concerns the contingency I've already mentioned. If those skunks get clear between now and when you jump off, leave me a trail to follow. Blaze the firs with the Canadian Mounted mark and put an 'E' under it. Good-day, Mr. Endersley. I wish you luck beyond the border and—in that other big adventure."

Sergeant Norvice wheeled and went out through the door, folding the tattered parchment as he went.

Endersley sat on in the little shack for a long while. "Scratch a Mounted man and you find a mixture of steel and gold," he muttered to himself. "Scratch a bit deeper and you come to a little iron-bound box marked Duty. *Eheu!* Let's go and see what's doing at the boulder."

# CHAPTER X

When he got to the head of the Falls, he found Norvice and his troopers in earnest council under the shelter of the great rock. Each of them had volunteered to crawl round the boulder when they heard what was in their chief's mind; and their offer had been received with a coldness and a silence that was more full of frigid refusal than any spoken sentence could have been. Only one of them essayed to question the Sergeant's wisdom.

"Oi'm after thinkin' thim swabs down there 'ud count it a win for thim if they dhrapped a bullet into ye instead av wan av us," said that individual, with tremendous innuendo. "Maybe 'twad be arl for the best if 'twas Oi meself that took a little squint down there by—"

"Trooper O'Donohue, I'll trouble you for no further help than a shut mouth," cut in Norvice, icily. "Get this under your hair. I'm not going to crawl round in front of this rock; I'm going round on my two feet, upstanding; I'll be able to do it quicker that way, and I'll get a better view—I'll be able to see more. Two of you will cover me as well as you can without exposing yourselves, but, understand this, you won't shoot till you get my 'Yes' or 'No.' Your guns might crack off just when I'm saying it, and from what I've seen of their markmanship, I'll only get the chance to say it once. If the tunnel head *is* there, you'll wait for darkness and make a rush for it. That all clear?"

"Aye."

"Has there been much firing from them while I've been gone?"

"Hasn't been a bullet all afternoon, Sergeant."

"You boys fired any?"

"Not since midday."

"So well and good; they may be a second or two off their guard."

Without a moment's hesitation Norvice suddenly stood upright and jumped round in front of the stone. Those behind it heard six rapid footsteps as he ran forward. There was a tense, electric silence. Endersley and the troopers heard each other's laboured breathing, and a horrible tingling prickle was racing up and down their spines. Their ears were straining feverishly for Norvice's shout—and more feverishly still for the drone of the bullets overhead.

But, marvel of marvels, nothing happened.

"T'hell wid them." Trooper O'Donohue reared up and the rest, as though thankful for the example, stood bolt upright beside him.

The sight that met their eyes sent a quick thrill of pride and victory gripping at their hearts. Norvice was standing at the edge of what seemed to be a small pit or well a few yards beyond the boulder. He was staring, with the fixed intensity of a mesmerized animal, at the gap in the Falls, where Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff, with the white waters thundering down about them, stood on the ledge and shook their fists in demoniacal fury at the man in scarlet and blue.

Blear-eyed and desperately at the end of their tether, they howled their hate and defiance at him.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot, they haven't a bullet left

between them." Norvice's voice came back to them in a sibilant, hissing whisper.

That was the truth of it, the fatuous, ridiculous truth of it. The outlaws had fought till they were cleaned out. Caught as they were, they hadn't as much chance of putting up another fight as the Devil has of entering the seventh heaven. They were sodden and dripping with the spray that rose eternally behind the Falls, and it was plain that starvation was stamping its mark upon their frames. But for all that, standing out at the last edge of desperate extremity, they mouthed their blasphemous curses at the men who upheld the Law.

Norvice turned to his troopers.

"Go down and get 'em," he said.

Three of them grinned and went scrambling away down into the tunnel head.

The outlaws saw them drop out of sight and then the other three on the bank saw an act of such superb animal courage that even Norvice refrained from pulling his gun on them. He couldn't. He just stood there spellbound. Griff and Magain looked wildly into each other's eyes for a brief, helpless second, then, with a last insane yell of maddened passion at Norvice, they leapt, all standing, out into the great volume of the Falls, first Griff and then Magain, spinning slowly over and over as the water twisted them in its headlong plunge.

Norvice's binoculars were out in a clicking flash. Down in the seething vortex, at the base of the Falls, two pigmy figures were tossing and buffeting about among the whirls and boiling eddies.

"Any rocks there?" asked Endersley.

"Don't think so. There's granite and basalt ledges,

but they missed them; the river's too full to show them. Look! They're swimming! Both of 'em. Blast their hides, they're in the outrace. Gosh, they're getting clear!''

Endersley, shading his eyes, saw the two men battling painfully in the current that swept out like a millrace from the great whirlpool at the foot of the spuming Falls. In a minute they were bobbing and dipping in the calm water beyond the flux.

''After 'em,'' shouted Norvice. ''They'll make the bank!'' There was a swift scurry and scatter as the troopers ran helter-skelter down the steep sloping escarpment of the Falls. At the bottom there began a desperate hunt for a canoe, a raft, anything to get them afloat. And over on the opposite bank Magain and Griff waded slowly ashore, and turned and spat their contempt at the stampeding troopers before heading into the bushes.

Norvice was biting his lips with rage. There was not a boat on the whole beach. He recalled his men—the only way of getting on their trail was to get up beyond the Falls and cross over Little Cedar River, a six hours' run at least.

The news of the escape spread quickly through Cedar Falls and every man jack turned out to assist in the final round-up. They trailed them to a miner's shack where they helped themselves to dry clothes, grub, and a few clips of ammunition. From there the trail led through four miles of rugged, tangled bushland to the Yukon water edge.

''Gone to water,'' growled Norvice. ''Probably paddling all night and sleeping all day.''

For six days and nights the party hounded and harried the river-banks; outposts were notified up and down

stream, but on the seventh day the Cedar Falls boys gave it up in disgust.

And there was another sad shock waiting for them when they got back to the village. The first arrival went flying back along the trail with the news.

"Hi, boys, we're sold!" he yelled.

"Eh! What's up?"

"It's Endersley! He's gone!"

"*What!*"

"Gone! Cleared out! Him and the gal. Gone five days, Henderson says."

Then there was pandemonium in Cedar Falls. For overhead the snow masses were forming. In a little while the vast silent whiteness would be falling upon the earth, blotting out all sight and trace of men going to and fro in the wild, when hundred-mile trails are obliterated in an hour, and when men who lose the trail lose it for good.

The news flashed round from camp to camp and Cedar Falls went rocking off its balance. The atmosphere sizzled and rang. It was like ten thousand taut, invisible wires all humming and straining to the snapping-point.

Miners and trappers who had been out on the hunt for the last of the Magain gang came pouring back from all directions. Cedar Falls filled up and overflowed in a mad, delirious twinkling. For hundreds came with them. The close-guarded secret of the long summer months was out. It raced abroad in a flying Babel of excited tongues. Up and down river the story flew, hot-foot and hard-sped with the speed of anger. Men who, for their own sakes, had been as dumb as dead oysters since the day Endersley tottered down out of the back-blocks, shouted and yelled aloud of the disgraceful trick played upon them.

Hot-eyed, livid-faced men glared and shouted at one another in an access of rage that threatened to flare up into open fight for less than a word or a look.

They poured in in batches from all the nearer locations round Dawson and Forty Mile, hot, panting men running hard through the first of the snows.

Gold! The word whizzed round the excited outcamps like a prickle of red-hot fire. Gold!—in lumps and sackfuls and sledge-loads. Gold!—within dog-run of the Boundary. Found and lost again: given and snatched back again just when their tormented hands were clutching up to grasp it.

Radford, Gold-Bottom, Klondike, Last Chance—all the centres round Dawson—Bonanza, Sulphur, Dominion, Caribou, vomited their unwanted on to the river-banks and shot them yelling up into Cedar Falls. They roared into the river settlement in a frantic, gold-mad flood, fighting, desperate, to get in at last on the great chance that had been denied them through the years.

Later they were stampeding in from points farther out. Scroggie Creek, Stewart and Ogilvie, McQuesten, Black Hill and Thistle, and all the tiny towns in the south and east: Cudahy, Boundary and Eagle; Starr, Glacier Creek, and Sixty Mile, and all the northwest centres within leghail or sinew-sight sent in their contingents, forty and fifty strong, to swell the seething numbers in Cedar Falls.

They were a rabble, the wandering Legion of the Hard-Lucks, wide-scattered, eager, purposeful, always on hand but never quite near enough, always ready but never in time—the men who had struck it and missed it on a hundred barren runs. In they streamed, long tenuous lines of them, black moving bands that thinned away back over

foothill and creek to nothing and nowhere—all with the thrilling tumult of a great new Hope ringing and thundering in their brains.

Gold! They were tracking it down at last: hounding it home to its lair—the lair which to them was nothing more or less than the wide-flung maw of the Cornucopia, generous, abundant, magnificent. Gold! It was roaring aloud all the wonder-songs of the South, of warm, winy winds that sweep splendidly across the empires of the sun, of love, comfort, riches, ease, money to burn, food till it palled, sunshine and all the languorous delight of moneyed life down there in the sunlands where life was worth while; of the end of all struggle and striving in the bitter lands, a surcease to the endless, bone-grinding days on trail, the soul-deadening weariness of leg-lifting over the white tenantless leagues, a let-up on the everlasting stint on the grub-pots. It spelled Comfort—and they know nothing of comfort who only comfort know.

*They* knew that maddened rabble up there by the rumbling thunder of Cedar Falls they knew; and all the burning, craving desire for it, bottled up and repressed through the long killing years on the hard-luck trail burst out in their breasts in a roaring torrent as rumour after rumour flashed round. All the corked-up passions of a lifetime crystallized and centralized on that magic promise of gold. Cedar Falls danced unharnessed on the brittle edge of hysteria as the tales flew round.

And what rumours they were!

One yelled that Endersley had already pegged and claimed—that his vein broke surface within twenty miles of the Falls. Another lammed in with the story that Endersley had been seen heading eastward, hell for leather,

making the devil's own pace for the Rockies and the Mackenzie River beyond, with a full team of dogs and the Sitka flying along on his heels with the relays. Another swore he had just seen definite proof that Endersley had been bluffing all the summer; that he had never struck a vein in his life, and that he had taken the first chance that offered of clearing out before time brought the showdown. An excited, half-inarticulate Gaul from the Hudson coast stuttered and stammered that Endersley was all in—smashed up in a rockslide going over the Harper Mountains; pulverized and obliterated by a landslide through the valley. "Endersley, he down in the benches," he spluttered agitatedly; "down there climbin' through wit' the outfit, ess! The rock she rumble, boom! She slide down like 'ell. Whooshter! Bong! Endersley he vanish—dogs, outfit alla lot. By Gar! Ess!"

So the rumours went zipping and sizzling across the camp from mouth to mouth, always finding fresh ears and fresh tongues as fresh hordes poured in, eager to lap up every word there was going in connection with the big strike. And the frills were added in their journeys through the groups. They landed back at the Come Inside almost in the guise of fresh yarns, dressed and distorted out of all knowledge. Thus it was that the rockslide that killed Endersley had been started by the Magains in a fit of revenge; high up on the top-rails over the Harpers they had seen that the game was up and loosed a shower of rubble that became a resistless avalanche, sweeping everything before it through the benches. Thus it was that Endersley had pegged ground in Cedar Falls itself. And another story came back to its starting-point so dolled

up that the man who started it listened agape to his own story and never recognized it.

More and more poured in, old-timers rubbing cheeks with the jowls of greenhorns in their first season. An army deserter dossed with a doctor of science; a Panhandle teamster bedded with a bankrupt who in his day had operated vast undertakings on Wall Street. A certificated mining engineer offered a hundred dollars a night for shack-room and got it with the man who first discovered antimony in Cedar Falls; a young reprobate with an English title—long since fallen off its hook—shared a lean-to with a man who, before his voice cracked up, had been an international idol.

Cedar Falls couldn't hope to hold them all. Some cleared out almost as soon as they landed in; little, resolute parties of old-timers who threw their grub and courage into a common pool and headed out on the bare chance of picking up Endersley's trail or of making a lucky hit at some outpost or other where they could tell for a certainty that Endersley had passed that way.

But most stayed on, keyed up and tied down to the hope that reliable news would come through. With stamped-ing kits strapped to their backs they hung on and waited for something on which they could peg their faith before setting out on a rush, which they knew from old experience would resolve itself into a terrific exposition of the survival of the fittest.

Pack tents, tarpaulin lean-to's, and skin-made hedge shelters sprang up like mushrooms inside and outside the town. It was a mobile population that carried its own city on its back, a gipsy city that itched to be up and on the run again.

Grub jumped a dollar a pound in the first hour, and there was precious little to sell. By nightfall it was standing out at four dollars a pound—any sort of grub, from iron pork to sack flour. And there were no sellers. Faro joints and roulette boards appeared as running concerns in less time than it took to pick camp-sites. They were up and working inside the hour, a standing monument to the miracle of their own birth, a tribute to the amazing marvel that *some one* had packed the necessary apparatus on his back across every yard of the frantic miles whence he came.

Josh Henderson put away his stampeding kit. He no longer had need of it. Josh had found his gold-mine behind the serving-bay of the Come Inside.

And then, out of the whirlpool of excitement, rumour and counter-rumour, scraps of real information began to get through. It was not got easily, for the old-timers were unwilling to tell. They regarded the interlopers with a sour animosity that blazed to life in a score of brawls before the night was through.

"D'ye hear that?" roared one. "Boss of the saloon here says he's seen the stuff! Seen the specimens they brought down with 'em. Bigger'n ptarmigan eggs they was—one was bigger'n a gun-butt. Scooped 'em out of a single pocket, he says. Boys, she's a smasher, a brain-wrecker! Boss reckons, from talks he's had with Endersley, she must be the biggest heap of pockets ever c'lected under one skyline. Gawd! Where is it—*where is it?*"

"Th'ain't a word crep' out. There's only two of 'em in on it. Him and his Siwash—and the rest is as stranded as we are. They've kep' it closer'n a clam, them two. Th'ain't left a clue no ways. Sky-pilot here says they're

aimin' to send word through to the Falls after they've got through and pegged."

"Yes, like hell they will!"

"That's what the Parson says, anyways. Mad when they hit it. Snow-drunk. Snow in the head: ice in the lungs. The blamed fools never pegged."

Another one hurried up hot-foot from the Come Inside, the exchange centre for all news.

" 'Ey!" he snarled. "'Thar's a gal in on this! A picture-card chit—amazin' good-looker, accordin' to the talk back there in the ginnery. Got Endersley wropt round her little finger with his head down under her thumb, so they say. Rustle her out, boys; sure, we kin make her talk!"

"Aw! Talk nothin'. Endersley yanked her along with him. Had it from Henderson himself. Said Cedar Falls would be holy hell when the stampede hit it, and that hell wasn't no place for an angel. That's the way he is about her. It's a love crash. Aw! They make me tired!"

"Well, how in thunder did he get clear?" boomed an angry voice.

"Sent her and the dodgasted Indian away out of it three days ago. Betcher life they've been waitin' on some quiet rendezvous with the outfit till he showed up. They're best part of a hundred miles clear by now. 'Strewth! Look at the snow!"

The yellow snow-gloom dropped lower. The clouds seemed almost to have settled their bellies over the tree-tops. The light failed until it was little more than the thick afterglow of a quiet sunset. And the clouds began to belch themselves downward, strewing out their armies in white sweeping cataracts.

The snow obliterated all but itself. It swirled and raced along in straight, horizontal lines, wind-driven, like spindrift pelting before the gale when the storm-gods are kicking the wave-tops. Tiny, salt-like particles they were, sweeping down like a glittering mist, so powdery and individual that their numbers made them audible. They sounded like millions of grains of hard, white sand blown against glass.

In an hour all colour had faded from the land: it merged, melted, and dissolved in that great vista of white that would increase, multiply, and remain untouched till the summer swung round again to break it up.

"The North," said Josh Henderson pithily across his bar, "was puttin' its blamed shirt on. After that would come its weskit, its woollies, its coat, and then its overcoat. After that they'd maybe have a bit of snow; and then, in a manner of speaking, winter might be said to have arrove."

And Cedar Falls, at the high-strung limits of exasperation, stood and watched. Without being able to lift a finger to prevent it, it saw its great chance slowly and gently erased by the falling snow. Sullen cloud-squadrons banked up and stolidly emptied themselves over the inert countryside. Their very earnestness was malignant. There was something grimly deliberate about it; it seemed to mock them silently. Vast reserves rolled up. Trails faded and vanished as the minutes ticked by; they slid out of existence like ice in the sun. The footprints of the last arrivals were obliterated almost before their clamorous demands for hot gin in the Come Inside were complied with. The wide, majestic North was being subjected to its annual clean-up; was receiving its mammoth top-

levelling of white. The little creeks had long since frozen solid. The snow fell on them and covered them; fused them and made them one with the land and the whiteness. All the breakages and cleavages were soundlessly filling in, the roughness, the brokenness of the surface disappeared under the levelling downfall. The drifts crawled slowly over scrub and bush and flattened them out of existence. The only things that moved in all the wide profundity were the great rivers, and even they from bank to bank were fast locking into immobility. For the riverbanks were marching out hour by hour into midstream: anchor ice was forming down in the silt. Mush ice clogged on the paddle blades and had to be chopped away after each tenth stroke. It was that most tremendous of all Northern phenomena—the freeze-up of a whole mighty continent, stark, relentless, unstoppable.

And somewhere right out there in the snow-haze two men and a girl were laying a trail that was heading along to more gold than Cedar Falls had ever seen in its life, a trail that moved onward mile by mile, and yet was never more than a mile in length, a trail that was being blotted out by the snow-armies as fast as the snowshoes laid it. Out there they were trailing down to the solid realization of all those wonder-songs of the South. And Cedar Falls, not even knowing which point of the compass to take, sat at the fires and went cross-eyed with the violence of its vituperation.

Along toward evening Devereaux pulled in with the mails. Among them was a letter addressed to Sergeant Ralph Norvice. It was from Endersley, and had been five days in the post, although the postmark was that of Cedar Falls. Norvice grinned at the address—"Sergt.

Ralph Norvice, R.C.M.P., c/o Circle City." It had to make the run out to Circle and be redirected from there. Besides a letter it contained an open sheet, which Norvice posted on the Government board under the Cedars. It was addressed to the old-timers of Cedar Falls, and was in the nature of an open letter.

"Boys," it read—"I had to make my get-away as slick as this for reasons you yourselves will best appreciate. I haven't pegged, and if a stampede caught me up now, the chances are I never would. I'd be flattened out before I got down to the Recorder.

"I'm asking all you Cedar Falls boys to hang on down there till you get word through from me. I'll be waiting here to give you a line on the best locations—and the rest will be up to you. I reckon there's about enough to go all round. Wish me good going.

"Luck to you,

"Robert Endersley."

There was a full-chested yell of relief from the Cedar Falls boys when that notice went up on the board. Old hands, with rough-bearded faces and leathery skins, grabbed one another's arms and danced round it like a crowd of five-year-olds. They roared aloud the old incongruous ditties of a younger year. They drank copious and uproarious toasts to the man on trail; prayed to their gods to bring him through; and they ragged the interlopers till there was the standing parts of a civil war in Cedar Falls. Then, having got over it a little, they sat down to play pinochle while they waited, with a vast and magnificent patience, for the news to come through.

# CHAPTER XI

The morning broke fair and fine. Cedar Falls peeped out of its cabins and canvas and rubbed its eyes at the oddity. There was not a cloud in the sky. A cold sun, bright and white, poured down from a dome of cloudless blue over a landscape that looked like dead-white sugar icing on a flat immensity of Christmas cake. There was a foot of snow down and a hard frost gripping the land, when, by all normal usages, the snow should be at least a yard deep—four in the drifts—and thawing rapidly.

That was the usual way of it, a long and heavy first fall over two or three days, then a thaw to give it a substantial bottoming of ice, and then the final freeze with a blizzard every day for a month. There should be wet, lowering skies after the first fall, with even an occasional rain or sleet squall. But here was a brilliant sun, void of every scrap of heat, but drenching down out of a sky that never looked likely to hold another snow-fall for days and days.

Batches of the invaders in-harnessed and hit out on trails all over the compass. A trail broken on that crust would remain bold and clear until the next fall of snow—and they were out to find any trail that held out a promise of having been made by two men and a girl. The snow, by holding off, had made pursuit possible.

Behind the straining dogs, far up in the eye of the North, the same idea was running through Endersley's

head. He rubbed his chin reflectively and looked up at the blue of the sky.

"June," he said, "get on the sledge. The snow's hanging off and your marks could be followed up by a blind man. Get on the runners for a spell. Charley and I will break trail ahead."

They were beyond the Harpers, past Mount King and Ogilvie River, right up on a deadline with the Canadian-Alaskan Boundary, the Nahoni Mountains poking their staring white summits up into the sky on the eastern skyline, the twin peaks of Dewdney and Burgess sparkling beyond. Boundary Mountain was in line ahead, a far-shining bastion of the Porcupine River country, wide and empty, the first of the great peaks beyond the Arctic Circle on the Boundary route.

It was difficult country there. Cabins and camp-smokes were as rare as standing corn in city gardens. It was an untenanted emptiness, slashed across and across by high-shouldered divides and long chains of broken foothills—the heart and soul of the No-Gold country.

Endersley knew it. He had chosen that route because of it. It was taking him miles out of his way, but he was getting through on a trail that had no tongues to wag to those who might follow after. Only once had they encountered traces of humans—down by Mount Klotz, when they turned direct north. It was a camp, temporarily deserted, while its owners were, apparently, replenishing their larder in the woods.

Endersley avoided even that, avoided it as he would the plague, sheering off in a wide detour to leave it away east. After that they had seen nothing. And they blessed every hour and every succeeding mile that gave them

naught but a wide, oppressive solitude. Here and there Endersley picked out a fir tree and blazed it with the Canadian Mounted mark. On the seventh day out, the sky began to fill again, and they breathed their thankfulness to the dancing sun-dogs.

They made camp and fed and rested the team. The going had been fine, despite the broken nature of the country, and, by travelling early and late, they had covered a lot of ground since leaving Mount Klotz astern. Now, only a few miles ahead, Boundary Mountain, buttressed by the ten-mile sweep of the Upper Ramparts, frowned down at them from his throne-room of white splendour. It was at Boundary Mountain that Endersley was aiming to turn west, cross the demarcation posts, and head through to the Yukon at the Great Curve. By that route they would get into heavier going, but they would miss all the little settlements with their myriad criss-cross trails along the great Porcupine River.

June had gone into the timber to collect wood while he and the Indian pegged down the tent and got the fires going.

"We 'bout halfway, huh?" said Charley, pounding away at a block of flour as hard as white coal.

"Just about half. We cross the posts to-night. Flour got a bit damp?"

"Alwuz duz when the snow stays up." Charley melted a pan of snow over the fire and beat the flour into a thick cream. Half an hour later a round pile of flapjacks, crisp and goldy brown, were standing in a tin in the embers "soaking," while Charley set about the bacon.

"Say, Charley, where's our little girl?"

"Wuz going to ask, Boss. She's been gone—" Char-

ley broke off from sawing through a slab of marble-hard pork and pointed with the saw-edged knife. "Boss—there's that dog of hers actin' all ways."

Endersley looked over at the woods. Sunnygold was standing out at the edge of the timber whimpering, yapping on a staccato note, running backward and forward in little circular movements. She saw Endersley looking at her and she sat back on her haunches, thrust her snout into the air, and gave tongue to the pack howl.

"Boss, she's worrit," said Charley decisively.

Endersley dropped his axe and went across to her. She scampered away into the trees and led him in a direct line to June, a limp heap under a stunted pine. He saw in a minute what had happened. A little to the right was a spinney, the top boughs so interlaced that they formed a great elevated snow shield. One of the trees had unburdened itself of its load of snow, and the outer branches, kicking back, had strained its neighbour beyond its overweighted strength. A great bough had fallen, snow-load and all, broken off at the trunk as clean as though axed.

It had hit June Royal underneath. She had got up and staggered forward a little way. Endersley could see her zigzag trail from the spinney to where she lay.

Without moving her he made a deft examination of her limbs. She had collapsed from pain as much as anything. He located trouble in both her right shoulder and ankle, and he knew it was trouble that would take long in mending. He picked her up in his arms and carried her back to the camp. Her hat had fallen off and her hair was trailing over his shoulder. Sunnygold ran along at his side with the hat in her mouth, her sharp eager eyes full of alarm and concern.

Charley had fitted up the collapsible stove inside the tent and he had got the burners going strong with compressed fuel. Blankets and furs were spread out in a comfortable-looking pallet in the corner away from the tent flaps, and in a bubbling billy over the cooking-fire the Indian was fusing strong coffee. The fresh, pungent smell of it came out to meet him at the clearing.

"Good old kid," he muttered.

"I wuz had an idea something happen to our gal," said the Sitka anxiously. "That dog was all het up all ways, huh! Bad?"

"No danger to the head, thank goodness. Branch fell on her. Nasty crack on the shoulder, but the ankle will be the worst trouble, I'm afraid."

"Going to hang us up, Boss?"

" 'Fraid so, Charley. June wouldn't faint for a pinprick."

The Indian looked up at the missing clouds and went out for wood, while Endersley tended June in the tent. Her ankle had swollen badly. It was red and inflamed and terribly painful. Endersley diagnosed it as a very bad wrench.

When she came to and got her bearings, she found herself snugly tucked away under the bear furs with the fire roaring away warmly beside her. Her ankle was tightly bound in a wet bandage and her shoulder ached and throbbed with all the devilishness of strained muscles and ligaments. Outside she could hear the dull mutter of the two men's voices as they sat the cooking-fires.

"Bad go, Boss, huh?"

"M'm! That ankle of hers will hurt like blistering blazes for at least a week. And she won't be able to put

a snowshoe on for longer than that.'' Endersley's voice was troubled and worried.

''Can't carry her, Boss?''

''Her shoulder's too groggy. The jolting about on that sledge would half kill her.''

Sitka Charley raised his head and gazed up the trail at the upflung summit of Boundary Mountain, ablaze with the crimson and gold of the setting sun. It reared up like a great smokeless torch, all aflash and aglitter with the red-hot streamers pouring out of the dying fires in the west.

''Nanayak's place along there, Boss,'' he said gravely. ''Going to make it?''

''There's not much else for it, old scout. We shall have to get her along there somehow—pick out all the level patches and break trail as flat as we know how. We must get her under cover, anyway; can't have her lying out here with about fifteen blizzards waiting to burst over us.''

''Startin' now, Boss, 'fore the sun gits right off?''

''We'd better. Wonder if old Nanayak still remembers us.''

They got her on the sledge at the unavoidable expense of five minutes' agony, and started out for Half-and-Half, the little trading-post that squats on the river at the foot of the towering Boundary peak.

Half-and-Half is an odd little settlement. It straddles the Boundary, half in Alaska and half in Canada. It boasted a fairly comfortable rest-house, a great long barn of a place right in the very centre of the village, owned by one Nanayak, an Alaskan born, but sired of an old Aleut from down below Norton Sound.

He was a fine old character, and rumour up that way accredited him with fabulous wealth, all gained from the exemplary position in which he had built his wayside hotel. He set it across the Boundary, and installed therein a movable bar and roulette wheel. When the Canadian police came galloping up to the door, all hands seized on to the bar and shoved it across into America, ten yards beyond their jurisdiction. And when the American posse came whizzing down on him, they shoved it back into Canada, and continued their play with a magnificently assumed innocence of the existence of the Law. Nanayak knew that the two forces would never raid him simultaneously—professional antipathy and rivalry between them was too keen.

The Porcupine River is a busy one for one so high north, and his place, the Fifty-Fifty, was mostly full. Endersley and Charley had called in there on their last run, when they were working down river from farther east.

They were both breaking trail with exaggerated care, legs almost crossed, to flatten the snow well down to the runners; and Nanayak had been watching them for some minutes from his porchway. Voyagers coming in from that direction were few and a long time between. It was not a recognized trail and was unsound, especially after a first fall. He went out to have a look at the newcomers.

Nanayak did remember them. He certainly did. He went swinging down trail to meet them, while June, lashed on a pile of soft stuff on the sledge, earnestly assured Endersley that her foot would be all right in the morning, and that if it wasn't he was to leave her at Nanayak's and push on ahead with Charley. The idea seemed to

tickle Endersley; he told her, pretty bluntly, that it was one of her best jokes yet.

"Hello, Bob!" called Nanayak, with a huge smile of welcome on his toothless face. "Hello—how are yeh! Whatcha got on the truck—sumpin' good? Howya been keepin'! Wheerya—oh, my Gawd!—if he ain't been and found a laidy!"

Well, that was Nanayak's way, in season and out. He approached the sledge with a half-fearful reverence, and, with hands on his knees, gazed down at the vision of totally unexpected loveliness looking up at him. He looked down at her as one might peep at a baby in a pram down South, interested, but nervously uncertain of himself. "Gor' bless my permortal soul," he ejaculated. "Say Bob, ain't she a dazzler! Come and have a look at her, Bob. Say, wheerya find her, eh?"

Endersley, grinning broadly behind his hand, took him quietly on one side, and explained a good deal; about the accident, about June, about Charley, about himself, and a whole sheaf of straight-faced lies to account for his presence there.

"I guessed sumpin' was wrong, Bob," agreed Nanayak. "Guessed it when I saw you and the Injin treadin' out a trail like as though you was layin' down billiard tables. Durn pretty gal, though, ain't she! And you wanta room for her, do you, till she's trail-fit? And you want it kep' quiet. Sure, that'll be easy. Owmighty pretty that gal, to be sure. I'll get my missus to fix her up. Yep. Married las' fall. Blackfoot gal. Good as any. *I'd* miss her! She'll be all right with her. Gosh!—ain't she a dandy! Gor' bless me immejitly. I'll tell the world she is. River's pretty full this season, Bob. Lotta new settlements

springin' up along down. Syndicate men hit copper lodes here last spring. Grubstakers found tin twenty mile up. Filled us up quick and tight. Burn my body, but that's a wonderful gal you got there, Bob. Snow's takin' a durn long time about lettin' go o' the sky, ain't it? Wanta sell that lead-dog of yours? Hell of a good puller. I still git raided, about twice a month: gamblin' laws are tough on this side the Posts; liquor laws clean daft on the other. What's her name? Sunnygold? Thassa queer name for a stunner like her, ain't it? Sure, I meant the gal! Eh? No; by the crackety bells of merry hell no, they ain't nabbed me yet. And they ain't goin' to. I reckon she's just the daintiest mossel I've ever seen, either side the Circle, since I can rec'lect. Oh, she'll be happy as Larry with my gal. Sure."

All the way up to the Fifty-Fifty he kept up his ceaseless chatter. He was bursting with news, yearning to hear news—he, the typical Garrulous Stranger of the wilderness, the living example of the type who unleash their tongues with a vociferous abandon at every God-given chance of a new face to talk to.

They carried her into his wife's own room. And the Blackfoot woman looked at her and touched her as one might look at and touch a wonderfully beautiful, exquisitely fragile piece of Dresden china. There was reverence there: the reverence of the black and ugly for her first sight of the white and beautiful.

"Ya see," said Nanayak, outside. "She ain't never seen a white gal before—and she thinks pretty well the same as I do about her. Say, Bob wheer *didja* find her?"

"She found me!" whispered Bob in his ear.

"Eeha!—maybe that's about the only way *could* happen," ruminated the old-timer.

They stabled their outfit in an outhouse and saw to the feeding of the dogs, while in the darkening room the Blackfoot woman, suddenly aware for the first time in her life of her own appalling ugliness, shrinking from the bit of cracked mirror on the wall, tended to the sore needs of the white girl with all the tender gentleness that has been woman's gift and greatness since flesh first became sensitive to pain.

As Endersley was turning in that night there came a brief knock at the door and Nanayak entered without further ado. His overwhelming volubility was not quite so much in evidence. He spoke quietly, almost with restraint, and he stared Endersley flat in the eyes.

"Everything all right now?" he asked casually.

"Sure doing fine."

"Gal all right—comfortable?"

"Yes, she's a lot easier; thanks to your wife. June's nearly in love with her."

"Been in and seen her?"

"Just left her; she's sleeping."

"What is she doing right up here?"

"Taking a trip round with me. Say, Nan, what's bitin' you?"

Nanayak looked at him for a moment without moving a muscle. Then he bent his head forward and said:

*"Where have you found gold, my son?"*

Endersley jumped. The question came as cold as an icicle.

Nanayak grinned. "Gosh!" he said quietly. "Do you think I'm blind? Or maybe daft? Do you think I'm in

my first season up here? Do you fancy I'm stickin' up against two forces of police, and beating 'em to it—*on luck?* Come, come, my son—think it out."

Endersley looked at the saloon-owner hard and level. Nanayak was known across half the mountains as one of the hardest old drivers in the North; to the other half he was known as one of the kindliest-natured men on earth. To both he was known as the 'cutest old hand in the game. And at that moment his forcefulness was showing in every line of him. It was man-to-man stuff, and Endersley saw himself being driven into a desperate corner. Nanayak *knew.* His knowledge flickered in his eyes, behind his eyes, and his cold mastery of the situation printed itself into visibility at the corners of his mouth. His whole attitude exuded quiet triumph. The old Aleut was reputed to have made a million; and Endersley was beginning to know how. Nanayak could start up a stampede as bad as anything out of Cedar Falls.

"My son, there's nigh a hundred leg-lifters within an hour of Half-and-Half;" the voice was infinitely insinuating.

"You—you're holding me up, eh?" said Endersley, sitting bolt upright in his chair.

"To my own terms, my son."

"What do you want, damn you? Fifty-Fifty, I suppose?"

"Try agen."

"Claims Left and Right of Discovery Number One?"

"Not!"

"Do you know what you *do* want?" Endersley blazed.

"Yep."

"Well, out with it."

"I want," said Nanayak, with dreadful deliberation, "to be sent for as best man when you make that astonishing good looker of yours, Mrs. Bob."

The old saloon-owner, chuckling profoundly at his own little joke, ambled away to his bar.

"What wuz up, Boss?" asked a puzzled voice from the dark corner bunk.

Endersley sat on his own bunk with a gasping laugh of relief. "Nothing, old scout," he said. "Put up your gun! Daddy was pulling my leg."

He went to rest that night with two nasty fears in his heart. One was that he had been leaving a dead clear trail behind him that would last until more snow fell, and the other was that June's foot might take even longer to mend than he had first thought. And both his fears were justified. Not only did the swelling in June's ankle take an obstinately long time in abating, but his up-trail had actually been found—accident, it is true, but still, it certainly had been found.

Two figures, gross and forbidding, swung out of the big timber on the southern side of Mount Klotz. One had a haunch of young deer meat on his shoulder; the other carried a repeater rifle and half a dozen birds tied by the legs. They wore snowshoes and travelled easily at a good pace—men who were thoroughly at home in the snowlands.

"Couldn't be better," said one, "considerin' all things."

He stopped and surveyed the scene. Quiet, calm and unutterably peaceful, the great swinging miles of white country rolled away to the misty horizons. There was peace and contented silence in the frosted air.

"A perishin' sight safer than the Bluffs, anyway. I'm

still wonderin' how the blazin' banshee that Falls crowd managed to shin up two miles of granite inside five minutes."

"Aw, forget it! We're clear, ain't we? And as safe as a time lock. Within a jump of the Posts, when wanted—and no one ever comin' within dog-miles of the place, 'cept Injins and madmen—" He stopped and dropped his gun. A startled look of amazement had shot into his morose eyes. He almost stopped breathing.

"Anything stung you, Bully?" Griff asked the question with a hint of concern in his voice.

"Look!" Magain's arm went out half-fearfully to a thin, grey hair-line that crawled away over the snows, almost imperceptibly, and scarcely half a mile away.

"That—that's Norvice!" stuttered Coldwater, a cold perspiration breaking out on his forehead. "He's laying up there on Klotz, dogging us. He's—"

"Oh, shut your darn face!" Magain picked up his gun and strode forward. They approached the trail and stared at it long and earnestly.

"One—two—three!" muttered Griff, under his breath. "That'll be Norvice an' two troopers. Now, why the devil don't they open fire. They sure know they've got us stone cold. I s'pose—"

Whatever he supposed never came to fuller light. Magain had suddenly gripped his arm and was babbling away agitatedly in suppressed excitement.

"Look here, Griff!" he said hurriedly. "And there—and there! That third pair of snowshoes was never worn by a man! It's a gal's step and a gal's shoe! There's no kick to the step. Griff, by the livin' powers, we'll peg Mister blasted Endersley out of it yet! This is his party

or I'm a Siwash. He's made his jump! It's him! Lively now—we'll be in at the death, or I've never seen gold in my life!"

They had no dogs, no teams, and precious little outfit. They travelled light. They had no trail to break, and, furthermore, they were men who knew how to lift a leg when urgency called.

Two nights later Magain pointed to the snow-crust as they hurried along.

"See?" he cried in triumph. "The gal's got on the sled. Endersley's gettin' worried about the snow stallin' off. He's nervy."

And then, thirty-six hours after Endersley, June, and Charley had pulled into the rest-house at Half-and-Half, Magain and Coldwater Griff were in the spinney reconstructing the whole little drama from the telltale prints in the snow. They got it word-perfect from the snow-book right down to the part played by Sunnygold.

They even pitched their tent and made camp on Endersley's last site.

"In the morning," said Magain grandly, "we'll just go along and have a few words with that high and mighty gent who holds the keys. Griff, my very dear and affectionate friend, I reckon we've got him where he daresn't wriggle. He'll have to share the information or face a stampede!"

Griff said "M'm" in a low, unhappy voice. He was scarcely heeding the thrilling words of noble uplift falling from Magain's mouth. His eyes were fixed, dully, almost hypnotically on a fir tree at the edge of Endersley's north-bound trail. That tree was blazed with the haunting Canadian Mounted mark, and under it the initials R.E. And

Griff's dazed faculties were trying to calculate the exact percentage of the thousands of fir trees they had passed on their rush north that had been branded with that same dreadful threat.

Magain stopped speaking, sensing trouble in his partner's attitude. His eyes followed Griff's line of sight to the fir tree. And then he, too, saw that dumb, malignant sign.

# CHAPTER XII

THE long plank-built bar of the Fifty-Fifty was warm and full. Nanayak, the Aleutian, believed in making things as comfortable as possible for his clients during those months when zero sat despotically upon the land. The ringing song of pick and shovel had ceased along the river-banks, and the Porcupine itself flowed down to the Yukon under a four-foot ceiling of ice.

Drifts lay piled in the workings. Dancing wind flurries, scurrying about at the edges of the timber, drove the snow along like feathery smoke and piled the drifts higher.

The earth itself had gone as hard as concrete and picks gave way to gelignite. Jack Frost was straddling the earth, slowly strangling it into the silence of immobility. Its very omnipotence forced a state of idleness on the river that left the men but two alternatives—either to get away South to a latitude where work still went forward in spite of the season, or to stay on and eke out an existence on their savings with the proceeds of trapping expeditions into the woods.

Nanayak, being a business man, allowed credit to such as owned paying holdings of their own on the river, and, being human, he encouraged them to stay on and winter at the Fifty-Fifty. It was not a very difficult matter, for a warm, comfortable saloon is always vastly to be preferred to a month on an unbroken trail through the bliz-

zards and gales of early winter, a month that suddenly seems to go white-hot with the cold.

The majority of the population of Half-and-Half had crowded into the abnormally long barroom, for the snow squadrons were banking up again outside and it looked as though the interrupted first fall was going to finish off its job in dead earnest.

Four great sheet-iron stoves glowed red with quivering heat down the length of the bar. Billy-cans boiled and bubbled on the flat tops, the coffee creaming over in thick brown scud. The chinks between the split logs were caulked with dried tassel moss and yellow oil-lamps hung low from the roof. Daylight streamed in through long rows of uncoloured gin-bottles let into the walls, the gaps at the necks thick plugged with mud.

A concertina wailed in the corner. Over at the counter drinks were raised to the memory of the girls of other days. Men coupled the names of their loves in the South and swung their pewters up to the rattle of dice and the click of the roulette ball jumping on the wheel. Others sat round the braziers and held great slabs of river-caught salmon against the red-hot grids, turning them now and then on their long knives till they were cooked to a rich crispy brown.

Endersley and Sitka Charley had gone off into the woods to shoot dog-meat. The Blackfoot woman had examined June's injuries that morning and her considered verdict was that June would be unable to walk on that ankle for at least a week. Endersley went in to see her and June had begged him to push on with Charley to his location, and leave her in the care of the Blackfoot woman to follow on as soon as she was able to travel. But Endersley

wouldn't hear of it. He flatly refused to listen to such a proposition.

"I'll stay on here with you, little lassie, though we lose seven weeks, let alone seven days," he declared.

Faced with the unexpected check of a week's delay, he took counsel with Charley, whose thoughts immediately ran to his precious dogs.

"If you wuz buy grub for 'em, they wuz eat more dollars than we got," he observed pithily. "We wuz go shoot all they want. Shoot a lot. Plenty in the woods. Let 'em feed up. They wuz have to lift a leg quick when our gal get better."

Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff watched them start out. Camped in the stunted timber on Boundary Mountain, they commanded a full view of the river settlement, and all the morning they had watched turn and turn about for developments round by the Fifty-Fifty.

Griff nudged his partner, asleep by the fire.

"There they go," he said. "Him and the Indian alone. No dogs, no gal, just them."

The two of them stood up and peered through the coverts. Endersley and Charley were just heading into the straggly woods on the far side.

"Guns," said Magain thoughtfully. "That means they're out for dog-feed. And that means they're hung up for a bit. The gal, s'pose. Hurt too bad to travel." He cursed slowly and sourly below his breath. "That's going to make it blamed awkward," he growled as an afterthought. "It'll give Norvice all the time he wants to get up on his trail."

"Our trail!" muttered Griff aggrievedly.

"Oh, go to the devil," said Magain. "What you want

to do is to get up on those two cold feet of yours, walk back along the trail, and give yourself up as soon as you catch up to that gent in the red coat. Maybe you'd feel sort of relieved then."

Griff stretched himself. "Congratulations aside," he said. "What are we going to do about it?"

"I'm going down to the Fifty-Fifty!"

"You're mad!"

"I'm thirsty."

"But you—"

"But—but! You're *all* but! Say, Griff, you've got more buts than a goat. You're what I'd call the Steady Objector. I'm going down, anyway. You can stay here and warm up your feet at the fire, if you like—I'm going. There's a few inquiries I'd like to make in Half-and-Half—and somehow I still think June Royal would be happier with us than with that dashin' cavalier of hers down there."

Griff grinned. "Bully," he said, "you've got a kind heart. I admit I disremembered for the moment."

"If everything is O.K. down there," Magain explained, "we may quite reasonably expect to take a little walk in the woods ourselves. A couple of extra rifle cracks won't raise any curiosity in Half-and-Half—not till after! The only job then will be to grab the gal and make her squeal. She'll tell all right, if you treat her properly."

Nanayak nodded to them when they pushed the door open. He welcomed them in his own way.

"G'morning, gents; pleased to see strangers around here: which side did you come from? Didn't I see you heading down from Boundary Mountain way? Sure I did. How's things up over? Where's your dogs? Had

a good run down? What'll you drink—first one's on me! Gin? Good! Going to snow white niggers in a minute. Porcupine seems to be gettin' quite a busy river lately, don't it? Had quite a bunch of fresh faces round here these last few days. Maybe you're thinking of running a prospecting trip around these parts next summer. This is the coming location, not a doubt of it. Lot of copper and tin lodes found here last spring. All these boys here landed good claims. Ought to be a lot more found when they've sized up the run of the veins. Where's your camp? How did that gold prospect pan out up over the mountains there? Did they strike? Heard about that—''

His voice trailed off quietly. If he was nothing else, Nanayak was quick in the uptake.

Magain was looking at him. Coldly and flatly. And there was that in Magain's eyes which told him that his gatling gunfire of questions not only failed to find favour in his ears, but was sourly resented. In those few seconds, Magain gave him perfectly to understand that no matter how hospitable Nanayak might wish to be, no matter how willing to prove the good-fellowship of travellers in the wild, he, Bully Magain, was the last man on earth to respond to his overtures.

Magain took a step right up close to the Aleutian.

''Look ahere, dago, my name's Dumb!'' he growled, with his eyes glaring icily into the saloon-keeper's face. ''And my pard's name is Mute. And we are both deaf. Get it?''

Nanayak nodded cheerfully. All sorts and conditions drifted in and out of Half-and-Half. He had grown used to them all. It was no business of his if the North shrivelled a man or turned his blood to vinegar; no business

of his if a man preferred his own sullen company to that of others.

"Sure, I get it," he said offhandedly. "S'far as I'm concerned you can stuff your pernickety mouth full of dynamite and bite a sulphur-top."

A titter of laughter went round the bar. The two bullies were unknown right up there on the Circle; but the atmosphere they created was such that the hum of conversation had ceased almost as soon as they entered the bar. They seemed to carry an aura of animosity with them. It marched ahead of them and made itself felt in advance. The men in the bar had "placed" them instinctively for a couple of toughs out for anything they could get. Trouble-makers are not wanted in any small community in this world: in the North, where mutual tolerance is a keystone of existence, they are an abomination. Thus the titter that went round the bar was nothing more than a sincere appreciation of Nanayak's cool candour.

Magain looked round the room and sized up the odds. Some of the men there looked as tough as he did himself, and the majority of them returned his look with a stony stare that seemed to say, "Well, go on then—start something!" One, a little chap, standing at the bar, grinned at him.

Magain was already owning to himself that he had made a mistake. He had gone the wrong way to work. He hadn't dreamed the Fifty-Fifty would be so populous or so replete with gentry of his own size and weight. It would have been far better for him had he gone in as a normal peaceful voyageur, a man ready to drink a toast or swap a conversation with any one who happened to

be standing at his elbow. But Magain hadn't got it in his nature to be friendly or companionable even on a bluff. His surly viciousness was innate in him; he couldn't be anything else.

But his animal courage made up for much that was otherwise missing. He just pulled out his gun, cocked it, uncocked it, stuck it back in his pocket, and stared insolently round the bar.

"That's me!" he said to the Aleutian. "Dead or alive, that's me!"

"All very fine and large," said the saloon-owner. "What do you want?—I'm busy."

Magain took him by the coat sleeve and piloted him to a corner. "My son," he said darkly, "I didn't come in here to answer any questions—I came in to ask a few."

"You mean, you never expected to find so many useful-looking guys in this saloon, eh? You mean you *had* intended askin' all your damfool questions from behind the butt end of your gun? You mean you thought you were going to put the fear of holy hell into the Fifty-Fifty. Well, go on. Start her up! What's stoppin' you!"

Magain shifted his arm inside his coat. Before he could open his mouth to say anything, Nanayak cut in again.

"That don't skeer no one! There's plus forty boys in this saloon, and if you care to take a look round you'll find they've all got a hand in a pocket. You'd weigh 'owmighty heavy if their fingers cricked."

Bully Magain did look. He saw that a whole lot of the population of Half-and-Half were acutely interested in him; they were pointing at him from their coat pockets. The rest of them were paying Coldwater Griff a similar mark of respect. All save the undersized little guy who

stood by the bar, legs apart and hands thrust in his trousers pockets, grinning at him as though Bully was the funniest thing he had ever seen in his life.

"River junk," said Magain placidly. "They don't even make me tired!"

"Not bad," admitted Nanayak. "You've got sand all right. But it won't stop nickel. You'd best ask your questions and walk across the skyline. Some of the boys here have got touchy tempers and hair-cock triggers. Wal?"

"How long has Bob Endersley been here?"

"That's the one thing they never learned me at school. The only marks I ever got for arithmetic was the ones I sat on."

"When is he going?"

Nanayak gazed at the roof. "A most marvellous thing!" he said. "I've just remembered. I never went to school in my life. So how could I have learned any arithmetic?"

"Meaning you don't know?" demanded Magain.

"Meaning all that and a little more!" declared the saloon boss.

Magain bottled back his temper.

"Is his gal hurt much?" he snapped.

One or two of the men in the bar drew a little nearer. Bully's last question puzzled them. They hadn't heard of a girl coming to Half-and-Half. So far as they knew, Endersley and the Indian had come in on their own. Either these newcomers seemed to know more about the inside affairs of Half-and-Half than they did themselves, or Magain was putting a trick question to Nanayak, a question that concealed its real meaning. In either case their resentment went up a notch. They gathered nearer.

Nanayak looked worried. He was anxious. He sensed trouble stalking up flatfooted.

"I don't quite get you," he muttered. "Endersley certainly came in with as fine a lead dog as you'll find in any team in the North, but she wasn't hurt any. And, anyway, up here we don't refer to 'em as gals—with us they're just plain dogs or bitches."

Magain clicked his teeth.

"I'm not asking about dogs," he said savagely. "I'm talking about—"

"Well, talk to me about it, whatever it is!" suggested a youthful voice at his elbow.

Bully looked round slowly and stared in bovine surprise at the youngster who had been grinning at him ever since he came in. He was still grinning. He seemed tickled to death about Bully. Without the slightest shadow of fear, without even a hint of respect, he stared up perkily at the giant figure that loomed up a head and shoulders above him. His hands were still deep in his trousers pockets, and he seemed to be vastly amused at the situation.

"Eh?" said Bully with an effort.

He said it tonelessly, as though life had made a ghastly mistake and only he knew about it. Something seemed to have gone wrong with the universe. It had slipped sideways.

"I said 'talk to me about it,'" repeated the youth. "That's plain English, ain't it? Why, you great hulking lout, I'd pull your darned nose for two pins!"

Bully blinked. The world had gone stark, staring mad. In a minute it would remember itself and apologize. But meanwhile—

"You're the ugliest, nastiest, least-useful swab that ever hit Creation. The Devil himself got up with a liver the day you were born. If sin was coloured, you'd look pickled. The earth will heave a sigh of relief the day you go back into it. Wherever you die, your grave will be a standing insult to the country you are buried in. For three pins I'd push the nose clean off you."

Bully listened as though hypnotized while the sentence fell from the youngster's mouth in a cold deliberate stream. He swallowed and blinked again.

"M-meaning *me?*" he gasped.

"Not arf!" The youngster suddenly seemed to have become the living embodiment of every undersized, self-assured gutter brat that ever lived. He exuded plain cool cheek as obviously as a skunk exudes aroma.

Except for the laboured breathing, the silence that suddenly spread through the bar was as intense and nerve-tingling as the frantic period between the flash and the crash in the thunder-storm.

Bully remained dumb. He was fighting for his faculties, grasping for articulation. Words wouldn't come. They refused to form. The ability to think had suddenly become a ridiculously white space in his head. And it was painfully, dreadfully blank. He opened his mouth and shut it again.

"Man-eater giving a slight impersonation of a goldfish," explained the amazing youth. "He can also imitate a buzz-saw and wiggle his ears." Then he reached up on tip-toe and pulled Magain's head down to his lips. "If you try any of your roughhouse games in here," he whispered, "you'll never get out of it alive. I know you all right, my lad. And you know me, don't you? Not

arf! While you're in here, you'll keep that ugly face of yours shut tight as the two sides of a dollar, or I'll give one loud hellup and tell 'em who you are. And the reward is out for your carcase, with or without breath in it! That's how much they want you down South. C'm on, my lad, you'd best come across into America—you'll be safer there, maybe: a lot of these boys are just itchin' to consecrate a bullet in you."

Bully found himself being led gently but proprietorily by the hand to the far end of the bar. Arrived there, he seemed to get some sort of grip on himself, for he suddenly wheeled on his tormentor as though he would smash the life out of him.

But he met the calm, infinitely serene eyes of the youngster turned full on him and a small forefinger that wagged warningly at him. "Now, Bully, careful!" said the youth. "No naughty little tricks, mind—or your name goes wallopin' round the bar and a lot of the boys will have to share the reward between 'em; they're awful quick on the draw in the Fifty-Fifty."

Bully stared at him for a good minute. Then he peered closer and sighed in bewilderment.

"My Gawd!" he breathed. "So it's you, is it?"

"Yes, Bully, it's me. And, believe me, you're goin' to behave yourself as long as I'm around. For four pins I'd shoot you and old Coldwater there dead as lard and claim the reward myself."

"Where the thunderin' galligampus did you spring from?"

"Landed in here just before dawn. And very glad to have arrived, Bully."

They stared at each other. What might have developed

into an even more uncomfortable situation than already existed was broken up from an entirely unexpected source.

There was a sudden and violent commotion at the other end of the bar. A strident yell of "Police! Police!" thundered across the saloon, and every single soul in the Fifty-Fifty suddenly became galvanized into amazing activity.

"All bets off!" shouted Nanayak at the roulette wheel. "Claim your dust and stake next spin!" He grabbed the flickering ball and pocketed it. A score of hands seized all the bottles, cases, pewters, and cans on the long counter and passed them rapidly down to the far end of the saloon. Then all hands with one accord put their weight on the movable bar. With a rush and a clatter it was shoved clean out of Canada and into America, leaving the Canadian end empty, desolate, and tenantless. It went across with a resounding cheer and a joyous accompaniment of rollicking laughter.

Back went the bottles and cases and cans; back went the pewters, the whiskey kegs and tobacco tins; back went the ball and the spinning wheel and the life of the Fifty-Fifty picked up its interrupted swing exactly twenty-five seconds after the interruption began. It proceeded, moreover, without the flicker of an eyelid or the quiver of a muscle. Except that it proceeded in Alaska instead of Canada, under the Stars and Stripes, instead of the Union Jack, it might never have been interfered with at all.

"Stake your bets, gentlemen," droned Nanayak pleasantly. "Stake your bets—the ball's jumping and red is due for a turn-up. Five consecutive blacks, gentlemen—it's bound to be a red this time. And a nice red policeman to watch fair play. What more could you want?"

The door slammed open and a tall, clean-cut figure strode in. There was a fine devil-may-care independence in every line and stride of him, from gauntleted gloves to spurred heels. He came in with the unconscious swagger of the fit and clean and fearless.

Not an eye turned in his direction. His advent was utterly ignored. The old-timers of Half-and-Half continued their gambling, card-playing, eating and drinking, as though completely unaware of his presence. To them the Law was an institution invented and drafted by overfed, over-entertained cranks and monomaniacs in the South, who hadn't the faintest conception of what life in the Eternal Freeze was like, but who insisted that their Southern-made fads and fancies should be rammed down the throat of the North. So they obeyed the Law only so long as it left them to do as they liked. So long as it maintained the sacred rights of the individual, they upheld and enforced it to the last and final letter. But directly the Law poked its aggravating nose into the normal run of their harmless daily doings and began to shout aloud its endless string of irritating "Thou Shalt Nots," just when every instinct within them growled back, "I don't see why the devil I shouldn't," then they spread their fingers on their nose at the Law and wished it good luck on the journey back.

"Red wins," announced Nanayak from behind the wheel. "Pick up your winnings, gentlemen, and stake again. Red was bound to win that time. Five blacks couldn't bust the sequence. Claim your winnings quickly, gentlemen—we may have the police around here at any moment."

Ralph Norvice smiled right back in his thoughts. The

movable bar was not a new one on him; he had heard of it before. He twirled an unlit cheroot in his mouth and surveyed them. Somebody started humming the "Star-Spangled Banner" and cheerfully backed the red again. A salmon cooker at the far end rose, gravely raised his hat to the American flag hanging in that end of the bar, and as gravely resumed his seat.

Norvice struck a match.

"Watch me!" said a miner at the counter. "I'll make him jump out of his boots." He whipped out his gun.

Norvice raised the match.

There was the crack of a gun across the bar while the match was still a foot away from the cheroot. The black stick of tobacco kicked in Norvice's mouth and three-quarters of it was blown off by the bullet. Without a tremor the match continued its course and poised steadily against the two-inch stub still left between his teeth. He drew carefully at it, inspected it, saw that it was burning to his fastidious liking and sauntered toward the door. On the inside of the door he nailed up the charred Government Proclamation. The portion that had contained Bill Haines's portrait had been cut out, but the other two were still there, with the bullet holes through their eyes.

He turned from the door.

"Barkeep, I'd like a drink," he said.

"Sure," said Nanayak. "What'll you take?"

"I'll have a peg out of that bottle behind you."

"Which one, laddie; this?"

Norvice hipped his gun, fired, and returned it to his holster in a flash.

"No; that one with the neck off," he said. "I like it neat."

The man who had fired at his cheroot brought it over. He came over with it proudly. "Shake, Sergeant," he said. "I guess you learned to fly from the ground up. What's doing—looking for any one special, or just out on a routine rampage?"

"I'm looking for two."

"With that gun?"

"Yes."

"Poor devils. Who are they?"

The Sergeant pointed to the parchment on the door.

"Those two," he said.

The tin-digger went over and inspected the pictures. He studied them for a few hard seconds with precise deliberation, and then squinted round the bar out of the corner of his eye. But Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff had gone. They had cleared out when first the cry of "Police" went rocketing round the bar. And what is more, they had gone out through the far-end door—gone out into America.

"Have you had any strangers knocking around here this last forty-eight hours or so?" asked Norvice.

The other nodded non-committally. Unless the man is wanted for the crime of murder, the general trend of opinion is to let the Mounted get on with its own job.

"Oh, aye," he said. "The Porcupine has been filling up these last few weeks. There's been one or two strange faces drifting through lately. Chap named Endersley and an Indian came in the other day. Those the two ya mean?"

Norvice shook his head.

"Young feller come along early to-day. Looked tired and hungry. Slightly-built chap. Not much to look at,

but got plenty of go in him. Sort of don't-care-a-cuss-for-any-one youngster. Is he one of 'em?"

Norvice shook his head again. "That all you've seen?"

"How many more do you want?" parried the other, and went back to his game.

Norvice looked round for the "slightly-built chap, who wasn't much to look at, but had plenty of go in him."

He also was missing. The Mounted man went out and scouted around, but drew a blank at every covert. There was certainly no one visible from the top of any of the eminences around.

But he had missed him by less than thirty yards. At that precise moment the self-contained youngster with the undeniable hold on Bully Magain was sitting on the edge of June Royal's bunk, listening to her almost tearful pleadings to help her persuade Endersley to push on without her.

"Bless ya, that won't be very difficult, Miss Royal," he said with all the gay assurance of youth. "Not half as difficult as trying to stop laughing at Bully. You watch—I'll just go right along and find your boy, and I'll say to him, 'Hey, Bob; June wants you to get along down to where you're making for and not to hang around here. If you don't, I'll start up a set of ructions you'll never forget.' See? That's what I'll say. And I'll bet you that before the night's three hours old young Bob will be swiping the miles ahead of his dogs as fast as he can lay foot to the ground."

June sighed. "You won't find it as easy as that," she said wearily. "I've been pleading with him ever since this wretched accident happened. And all he does is to listen very patiently, pinch my chin, and tell me to hurry

up and get well. I've tried every means I know. And it's awful lying here. Tell him that I shall really be all right with Mrs. Nanayak; she is a dear soul and ever so understanding. He *must* leave me here. Things are happening that make me feel nervous. There's Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff. They've got here. And now Norvice has just landed in. That means that all the Cedar Falls stampede may be on the way to us by now. If they overtake him, he will have to fight like mad to peg any ground at all."

"Oh, don't you worry," said the youngster grandly. "I shan't trouble to go into all those details. All I shall say is, 'Bob, my son—out you go! Out on trail and hit the skyline—and keep on hitting it till you get there!' Then I'll just whisper something in his ear that will send him stampeding off as frantic as though he was one of the Cedar Falls bunch himself." He nodded pertly and slipped out.

Outside he got a shock. He ran full tilt into Norvice, who took him by the shoulder and marched him without a scrap of dignity into the barroom of the Fifty-Fifty. Norvice had been making a few inquiries on his own account, and he was more than curious to meet this queer lad.

"Now, my sonnie, where do you come in on this business?" he said grimly, when he got him inside.

"You lemme go!" he retorted defiantly. "You've got nothing on me—and I've got a job to do!"

"So have I," chuckled Norvice.

"Well, get on with it, then—and let me get on with mine. See here, Mister Clever, you're out chasing Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff, aren't you? Well, all the

time you're messing around here, you're losing chances. Those two husky sons of Mike are out on Endersley's heels by now! They've got a camp up on Boundary Mountain, and they came down to-day to raise Cain in this boozery. Luckily, I happened to be in residence, and I had the right kind of dope to hand out."

Norvice was staring at him hard. His face was white and his eyes glittering bright as ice marbles. He seemed as though he was on the point of seizing the boy in his hands, and was struggling fiercely to repress the impulse. His fingers were twitching and flexing convulsively at his sides. For the first time in their lives those who knew him saw something other than inexorable, ironbound duty stamping itself on the fine-cut features. The bitter, hawk look was fading, smoothing out into something softer, gentler, and infinitely finer. Whatever terrific storm of emotion it was that was battling through to its climax under that scarlet uniform, it was working the grand metamorphosis in the soul of the Mounted man. It was producing Ralph Norvice the Man out of Sergeant Ralph Norvice the Machine.

Slowly his hands crawled up to his coat buttons and fingered them. One by one they were pulled open. Then with an effort that was violently mental as well as physical, he broke the trance-like hold of eye and eye. He faced round to the charred picture on the door. *"Magain—I'm coming!"* he cried. There was a note of ringing gold in the chilled steel of his voice. He pulled off his coat, the splendid coat with its proud stripes and glittering badges of rank and authority and flung it in a heap in the corner. "Crossed the Boundary, have you!" He glared at the picture. "Then, by the living power that

made you, Bully Magain, I'm crossing the Boundary too! And I'm crossing every other boundary to-night. Magain, the barriers are down!" He pulled off his wide-brimmed Stetson and flung it sheer across the bar.

"Good-bye, Scarlet—I'm through!" The words were vibrant with thrilling joy and bitter sorrow in the same breath. "They don't want a married man in the Mounted! I'm through! Free! I fought against it. Sought it and fought it till it made me sick!

"And that's the end of it. And all you hoodlums here bear witness. Sergeant Ralph Norvice, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, resigned his post here and on this day. Plain Ralph Norvice is free to cross the Boundary; free to get out on the trail again. And plain Ralph Norvice is free to do the only human thing a man is born to do. Desertion? They can call it what they like. I'm through!"

Proud-faced, and with shining eyes, oblivious of the staring crowd around him, he turned and faced the slim figure. He held up his arms to her, wide and eager.

"Nell! Nellie, my girl, my dearest—"

Nell, for one miraculous second, looked at him, her mouth half-open and lips trembling, and Norvice with a bound like a panther caught her as she fell.

Neither of them heard the raucous din that broke out around them. Her cap had fallen off, and the curls fell clustering thick about her shoulders. Norvice was pouring into her ears the wonder tale of love afire, aflame and splendid; of the viciousness he had forced himself to show her because of his pride in the Mounted; of his pity and sympathy, his love and admiration for her; of the end of all her troubles and pains; of life and hope and gladness

renewed; of the dear sweet years ahead and the grand joys to come. And there rang in her ears for hours afterwards the echo of his last thrilling sentence—"My God, sweetheart. I tried you high!"

And Nell o' the Dance Halls heard every pulsing, rapturous word of it. Heard it in spite of the din and clamour old Nanayak was kicking up.

"Hey! You bunch of unedicated bozos, clear out of it!" he yelled. "Kim on! Immejit, dodgast your hides! This here saloon is shut! *Out of it,* or, by crikey—!" He cleared his bar and locked the door on the inside.

And when the hours had passed and Endersley came back with a load of dog-feed, he was met at the edge of the timber by a new and transformed Nell: a Nell whose face and figure was alive with the newborn radiance of peace and joy; a Nell whose eyes were red and very bright. She caught him by the coat lapels.

"Bless my soul—Nell!" he blurted. "How on earth did you get here?"

Nell ignored the question. "Mister Endersley," she said very deliberately, "are you going to start out for your gold mine to-night?"

"I certainly am not," said Endersley flatly.

"You certainly are," she assured him, with deadly certainty.

"Why am I?" he asked.

"Because June wants you to. Because it's the sensible thing to do. Because the stampede is on the way. Because, if you don't, Mister Endersley, I'm going straight into June Royal, and I'll tell her where she can find that lost brother of hers."

"You—you won't!" gasped Endersley.

"Won't I?" came the ferocious answer. "Not to save my man becoming a murderer?"

"Your man?" Endersley looked at her in stark surprise. Events had moved beyond his range and he was out of his depth with Nell. She had such disconcertingly direct ways with her. She was what he called a flat out-and-outer. Her method was not so much to spring a surprise as to state a coldly deliberate fact. He held her out at arm's length and repeated his question: "Your—what did you say?"

"My man! He *is* my man," she flung back at him defiantly. "I've been through fire and freeze for Ralph. He knows I'd do it again—for him. But not for any one else, Mister Man; and I'm telling you so right now. Don't look at me like that. I ain't mad—only with you, you great cantankerous school kid. Listen! Ralph's quit the Mounted! Turned it down as cold as mutton! He's finished—through with the Scarlet and Blue! My God!—and men said he was married to the Force! Don't you see?—there ain't no uniform, no warrant, no Government behind him now; he's on his own feet for a lump of plain man-to-man stuff with the Magains. And he's across in the Yankee half, looking for 'em with a gun! If he gets 'em he will be wanted for murder! And Ralph will keep that fool oath of his even if he has to chase 'em clean up over the Pole. Damme! I want my Ralph a free man—I don't want to have to marry him on the run. That's why I'd go straight in and tell Miss June!"

Endersley gasped.

"What?" he cried. "Norvice jacked in? Norvice!! Resigned? Holy smoke!"

"Yes, sir, believe me! He didn't so much resign as

sling his coat at the rest of the earth. He will be whangin' bullets into Magain before you know the red stripe's off his trousers. But, see here, the biggest thing is that he wants *me!* I've beat the Force. And I can help him here for a bit. He knows you're around here somewhere. But you've got to hit the miles. You've got to put whole days between you and Half-and-Half. Magain will light out into your trail. And then, I guess, if you and Charley can't see those two hoodlums off, you don't deserve any one to fight your battles."

There were primal passions smouldering red in Nell's eyes; she was woman incarnate, with all the viciously protective instincts of her sex alive and burning within her, the instincts that have made her saint and martyr and mate through the ages. She faced him four-square and upstanding—woman, the fighter!

"Nell," he said, "you drive hard!"

"No harder than June Royal drove when you were flat on her bunk in Cedar Falls, with your mind and sight and brain playing dot and carry one with your tongue."

"If you were a man I'd—I'd kill you!"

"If you've got a killing fit on, you go and have a rub at Magain."

Endersley couldn't help but smile the grin of defeat at her. "Gosh, Nell, you're a corker!" he said. "I'm congratulating Norvice. He isn't marrying a woman—he's entering into a loyalty match with a human polecat. And the odds are about ten thousand to one on you."

"Then you're going?"

"I'll have to see June first."

"Then you're going! June says she can wait for you at Circle City. You'll have to register there. She'll wait

for you on the river trail when you come down from location. She won't come to no harm. I'll be with her. And maybe Nanayak and a bunch from here. Lordy, you do take some persuading. I never knew a man who wanted so much pushing into a million."

Endersley studied her for a moment and then pulled out a mackinaw envelope.

"Yes, I'll go, Nell. But you've got to clear out, too," he said quietly. "I don't like the idea of you around here in that state of mind. You'd be liable to go in and blab it all out to June, whether I'm here or not."

"D'ye think so, kid?"

"Maybe; maybe not. Anyway, suppose I ask you to do it as a favour?"

"That's better, my son."

"Well, you know I told the boys down in Cedar Falls that I'd send them word about the new location—I told them that they should have first shot at anything going?"

Nell nodded.

"I've got to get that message through to them. I think I'm safe enough now to send it through. It's all in this letter, the exact location of the strike and the quickest trails through to it. There will be other stampedes setting in as soon as the news goes round and you'll have to get down quick. Will you do it?"

Nell held out her hand for the envelope.

"Sure," she answered. "I'll see they get it all right."

"Give it to Josh Henderson at the Come Inside. He will see it through. As the boys drift in for drinks he'll just whisper the word to 'em. I want 'em to have a clear start on that other bunch of dumb-bells who landed in at the Falls when I hit the trail. And, just a moment, Nell"

—he bent down and whispered in her ear long and earnestly.

Nell grinned, a broad, gay smile that seemed to make new radiance in her eyes and newer, unguessed beauties in her face. She pinched his arm mischievously.

"Aw! G'wan with you!" she laughed. "You're no better than the worst. But I won't forget; not likely! I shall want him myself—but that part of the business is up to Ralph. At least, as far as I'm concerned. Of course, you and June are different; you're as good as all fixed up. But I'll tell him. Sure! Directly I land in Cedar Falls I'll go right up to him and I'll say—'Papa'—I'll say, 'Bob Endersley says will you hike along to Circle City as quick as dogs can take you.' And I'll say—'Papa, Bob says don't bring nothing in your pack—except a prayer-book and a—" Endersley put his hand over her mouth.

"Scandal-monger, get away home," he chided. "Go and see Ralph and tell him we will all split a bottle together in the Fifty-Fifty to-night. Your tongue will get you hung yet."

And under his breath, as he watched her go, he added: "It'll get you hung all right; but not for what you let it say, little kid, so much as for what you muzzle it from saying—you darned little lump of spitfire grit and pepper."

# CHAPTER XIII

Grey dawn, bleak and bare was breaking under lowering, heavily clouded skies. Dull winds were pressing up from the Yukon Flats far to the southward, wetting the crust of the first fall and dropping heavy blobs of it from the burdened pines.

Endersley and the Sitka were heading down to the river on the last lap of the journey. They had travelled the dogs early and late since leaving Half-and-Half, for there was much ground to be covered and the Cedar Falls stampede would cut across country through Circle City. Endersley was ahead, breaking trail for the straining dogs. Grand dogs they were, with Sunnygold in the lead. There were ten of them, peak-nosed, bright-eyed, sharp-fanged, square in the chest and lusty. Their back-kicks went out as far as their bushy tails and they were brimming over with life. They were full-fed, eager.

Theirs was the true husky blood. It showed in every line of them. The finest word in the whole language of dogdom summed them up—resolute. And they were wide-awake, born in the common dog-sense of the team spirit. When one ahead slacked off for a moment, or let the traces drag, the one behind gave him a quick nip on the flank as a gentle reminder that passengers were not encouraged in the teams that worked along the top-trails.

And the best and finest and truest bred of the lot was Sunnygold, pulling leader in the team. She was tawny yellow, a golden-eyed poem of a dog—Endersley's first

real gift to June, who worshipped the faith and trust of her and was hero-worshipped in return.

Charley was busy in the rear, thrusting his shoulders heftily against the kicking gee-pole. The sledge-runners bucked on it, rose, canted over and swung round, holding the long sledge true in the narrow trail.

"Ai ya!" he yelled. "Mush, you yellow varmints! Toothy! Son o' Mike! Figgerhead! Mush! Ai ya! Shake 'em up, Sunnygold!" The lash of the whip played aloud in the air, but light along their flanks. Sitka Charley could get twenty-five miles a day out of dogs from which another man couldn't flog ten.

There was small timber all around, pine and fir and spruce; and cluttering patches of niggerheads made the going stiff.

The grey dawn darkened and grew greyer as the day wore on. And an unaccustomed warmness crept into the atmosphere.

"It wuz gonna rain, Boss!" called up Charley from astern.

Endersley didn't reply. With less than twenty miles to go, he was inwardly cursing a thermometer that was climbing hand over fist. The snow was hanging mushy to the runners and the dogs were floundering in sloppy water puddles below the snow. The same thought was crossing his own mind—if the clouds began to empty, they wouldn't strew firm white snow over the countryside, but streaming deluges of rain.

Rain would perish the trail. It would batter the snow out of existence, and without snow the dogs would be useless. They both knew what was happening; a "kink" wind setting in warm and billowy from dead south, when

by all normal precedent raging blizzards and snow-choked gales should be howling down from the northeast.

They were right up over the Circle, on beyond the Sheenjek, Chandalar, and Salmon Rivers, on beyond East Fork and the slashing ranges strung out like mammoth tie-ribs across the gaunt country, right up among the feed-waters of the Middle Fork, whose torrential waters spout tumultuously out of the mountain heads in the heart of the vast Endicotts and burst in foam and spray through bench and canyon and high-lying valley into the ponderous Chandalar beyond the southward sky-rim.

By nightfall they had but a few miles to go, and the trail was getting soggier every minute. With the going down of the sun came the rain. The skies turned over and belched. It came in squall after squall, long stringy lines that whipped along almost horizontally and dislodged the snow in a pattering riot of running water. The whole landscape leaked and squirted and spouted water. It oozed up underfoot and torrented down overhead. There were lakes and rivers and seas of it falling every hour. It drove down through the valleys and whined along the benches. Cascades tumbled down the mountain-side and rushed in frothy, brown torrents across the flats. It was an interlude; a little spring fallen plumb in the middle of late autumn, a temporary break-up in the midst of the freeze-up.

"Hell!" said Endersley. "If this don't beat the band!"

He gazed at the impassable trail, at the leaking, water-logged land, at the straining dogs and the heavily dragging sledge, at the bare, brown patches of earth glaring out through the slushy snow, and cursed his luck.

"Charley," he said, "what do you know about that!

Here we are being *sunk* when we ought to be battling frostbite."

"Rain all night, Boss," said Charley decisively. "'Tis wind that has wandered. To-morrow he go. To-morrow he freeze like hell; snow like hell. Sure!"

Endersley brought the dogs to a standstill. "Not much use going on. Better make camp here," he said. "We are only wearing the dogs out and I could walk it quicker. You stay on here with the outfit. Put me up a bunch of grub and I'll push along. It's only just down there in the valley below the big divides. I'll peg and get back as quick as possible. Rest the dogs up—keep 'em separate, and don't let 'em fight. Feed 'em up all they want. We're ahead of every stampede yet, and it's up to the dogs to keep us there."

The Indian hurriedly made camp. While he was putting up the tent, Endersley off-loaded the sledge and opened up one of the bales.

"Got 'em all with me, old scout," he said. "One for you, one for Ralph, one for Papa, and one each for myself and the little lassie. I got them all cut out while we were hanging up in old Nanayak's. Yours will go through in Nanayak's name—a little arrangement we came to in the Fifty-Fifty. He'll go thirds with you."

He fished out a wooden mallet and a great bundle of pitch-pine pegs, twenty-five of them, all with initials cut neatly in the top and at the sides.

Charley looked up and grinned. Throughout the whole run of the trip Endersley had said no word to him about getting him a claim. But Charley soldiered on content in the knowledge that Indians are not allowed by law to peg ground.

Charley nodded and grinned again. "Thank you, Boss," he said. "If we wuz make through to Circle all square, we wuz earned that stake!"

He hoisted his partner's pack and helped him climb into it, buckling the straps, Indian fashion, under the armpits and across the forehead.

"S'long, partner," said Endersley, slipping a thong through his snowshoes and hanging them round his neck.

"S'long, Boss," said Charley. "I wuz have everything ready when you git back."

He watched Endersley swing off through the trees and head down toward the gold valley at the foot of the Middle Divides. Thereafter for an hour he did everything a man could do to ensure a quick get-away and smooth running when the time came. He lightened the load of every single thing bar main essentials and threw the rest overboard. He disposed the real necessities in a way that would balance the sledge to perfection. He even doled out the tea and sugar in the little ration packets to save the time of doing it in the quick rest halts they would have to make on the journey down. He oiled the runners. Then, having tethered each dog down in the sheltering lee of spread timber, he grunted and turned into blankets, waiting doggedly sleepless for his partner.

Endersley got down to his location in the pitch blackness of an Alaskan rainstorm at midnight. He rigged up a shelter under the dripping bushes and waited for daylight.

Warm gales and hissing rain squalls droned through the night. They came in fitful spurts and gusts that soaked the whole country and set up a monody of dripping water that never ceased until the "kink" wind failed from the

south. Then the frost began to haul back along its lost miles and the rain changed to sleet and the sleet to tiny snow crystals.

The light came streaking up out of the southeast like a hazily luminous fan, fire bars that reached grandly out of the red horizons and lit up the glittering fires on the distant peaks. It showed a country almost denuded of snow, a country over which a sheet of thin ice was slowly forming to the falling mercury.

Upflung summits of mighty divides reared up white-capped and flashing into the dome of the morning, their sides fretted and grooved with the scars of old avalanches long since lost in the rivers at the bottom. The timber on the high sides was stunted, mere six-foot growths of mountain firs whose stringy roots wrested an heroic sustenance from the frozen barrens above the timber-line. Through the narrow valley the riotous waters of the Middle Fork thundered in a creaming cataract that plunged from ridge to ridge like a live thing.

The whole country was broken, sundered, and riven; it was tall and colossal, a chaotic tumbling and lumping of mountain and crag and gorge and torrent—wild, rugged, magnificent in the stark and proper cache for the primal stuff, yellow and glittering, that was part and parcel of its desolate soil.

Endersley scrambled down to the river. Without pausing for food he worked through the day. He unslung his pan and tried out the whole length of the river. Then he felled a tree and crossed the torrent to the opposite bank and worked back again on that side. The vein threw heaviest in the dead centre of the bearing strata. And he discovered one thing he had missed before. Middle

Forks was chock-full of gold-bearing quartz, as well as being the most tremendous collection of "pockets" ever located. He threw pan after pan at the creek-side; from north to south along the swirling waters the gold yield grew and grew till he reached the ore, plumb in the centre of his location. There, and for nearly half a mile round, his tests threw two solid ounces to the pan, a brain-killer, a record-breaker!

In spite of himself, Endersley's pulses were racing. The blood was drumming in his temples. He, with old Charley, had done the thing that thousands and hundreds of thousands had failed to do—traced down pure virgin gold right close up to water; gold, not in mere paying quantities, but gold in a great fabulous deposit that almost surpassed belief. If he hadn't seen and known the miracle fields of Bonanza, El Dorado, Dawson, and Stewart, he was almost ready to believe that Middle Forks was a dream, an hallucination set up in his brain to drive him mad. But he knew that there was no dream-fancy about Middle Forks. It was rich and real. It stared up at him from the primeval earth itself. In half an hour he traced one great pocket to its nest; a clotted collection of yellow nuggets that winked up at him from its earthy bed with all the cheeky abandon of the Gold Witch in its wicked eyes. Within twenty minutes he had tracked down another to within ten yards of the first, an even bigger one, a full nest that turned his test scale at forty-three ounces. And there were dozens around. On that centre bed they clustered thick, as thick as apples in an orchard.

A pan lifted from the creek bed itself sent four and a half ounces sliding out on the rim of the tin. He tested and tried and scaled and tested again, half-filling his pan

with earth and swilling it round in water until it ran to a thick brown cream. Deftly he got rid of the mud and added more water till the contents of the pan thinned down to the consistency of soup, and then, with a quick, swaying spin, he gave it the "prospector's twist"—and the slim line of gold beads slid out to the tip of the pan.

For four days he tried out patch after patch over the whole area, toiling like a nigger at the creekside.

On those tests he traced the upthrow down to its very thickest heart and there, on the main centre bed, he drove his pegs. With mallet and peg he claimed his ground; staked out the finest patch on the whole location and pounded the woods home, two across the length of it down by the swirling water, two right back inland and parallel with the first, and then the centre peg right plumb in the middle. Once that claim was recorded and filed on the books of the Gold Commissioner down in Circle City no power on earth could wrest it from him. It was his till the crack of doom, his till he no longer cared to work it or to pay his mining licence.

He gazed at the land that was his, proudly and valiantly his, honestly joying in the knowledge that his name would go down in the Klondike records as one of the bare score who have nailed their names on the ground that bears the thrilling title, Discovery Number One.

He knew that in doing so he had pushed civilization a hundred miles farther up the map; he had hall-marked the Higher North with the inexorable brand of the white man's conquering spirit. There in the colossal Endicotts, gigantic and huge, he had hammered a name that would live in the North for as long as men wrote in the books. He had done that which the great mineralogists said was

impossible, found a landslide of gold miles up and beyond the run of the vein. It was a fluke, an upthrow of gold to the topsoil, forced through by the unthinkable pressures of some vast subterranean writhing away back in the dawn mists of time. It had "bulged" the true vein which runs east by south from Nome on the Bering Sea sheer across Alaska and on through Dawson in Canada—and that bulge had thrust upwards to the light in the silent fastnesses of Middle Forks. And Endersley had found it. It was the kink that was missing in the vein a hundred miles west of Circle City. Against all the geologists of the North he had held to his belief in the existence of that kink. They, the men who had studied to know, held that the lost section had been forced downwards into the earth. He maintained that it had followed the direction of the bends in the break and would be thrown to the surface by the impregnable basalt foundations of the Endicott Mountains.

Just for a moment something within him exulted to an epic strain. His thoughts went rocketing round on a ballrace of gold. Gold seemed to have turned liquid and swamped his brain. For there in Middle Forks he had found the biggest deposit of clotted gold ever found in the North. It was as though a dozen philosophers had each found the long-sought stone and had assembled simultaneously on that wild spot to demonstrate their ability to turn mud yellow. Such moments are life itself to the gold prospector. They reach out and touch whole communities when there is gold in the air.

Then the other pegs fell off his shoulder with a rattle that brought him back to earth. With a half-ashamed peep round him he grabbed his mallet and set off. He

drove Sitka Charley's pegs to the immediate right of his own. June's he pegged on his left.

They would be Discovery Right and Discovery Left. All the other claims would take running numbers. Thus Norvice's would be entered as Discovery Right Number 2, and Pierre Bonard's Discovery Left Number 2.

Then he wrote out the five claim papers ready for filing and started back along the trail to his camp blessing every snowflake that fell. He had made himself, and probably a hundred others, millionaires twice over. In the spring Middle Forks would be on the map, right on the map, a rich, busy, hard-working, heavily populated, high-spirited town—a *built* town, a going concern.

He had pictured himself pulling out a grandly exulting yarn to Charley when he got back, a story that would bring the high lights of excitement leaping into even his imperturbable eyes. But when he got there all that he did was to unload his pack and look at his partner eye to eye.

Charley, without even a grin, said, "All right, Boss?"

And Endersley answered, "As good as gold, Charley."

And in the scintillant gauze of the falling snow he held out his hand and they shook, a quick grip and a tight squeeze that told bigger stories than any the Gold Voice told.

Charley turned away and jerked a thumb over his shoulder to the tent. "There wuz coffee and flapjack an' a pile of moose steaks keppin' hot for you, Boss," he said. "You better eat—you wuz had nothin' sence you ben gone, eh?"

"Darn little," admitted Endersley with a grin. Char-

ley had judged by the weight of the pack Endersley had brought back.

Charley watched him eat in stolid silence. Endersley was as hungry as a husky. He put away a mountain of grub and four cans of scalding coffee before he sat back and reached for his tobacco wallet.

"You finish?" asked Charley.

"Couldn't pick another bone!" said Endersley.

"Now, I tell you sumpin'," answered his partner in the voice of one who had waited advisedly until his hearer had fed and rested.

"Go ahead, old warrior."

"Magain is hangin' around!"

"*What?*"

"An' Coldwater Griff. I got their trail in the woods when I wuz out after that moose. They wuz lost us in the thaw. Couldn't find us no ways. Could see where they wuz drawing circles to git us agen."

Endersley was on his feet, white and fierce.

"Harness 'em up—quick!" he said. "Leave the tent, we don't want it. Hurry like steam! If they've been quartering the land around, they've found my trail back from Middle Forks to here. They'll pull my pegs, as sure as they're alive. You follow on with the dogs. I'm going back! Hip your gun and shoot at the first thing up. That trail will hold?"

"Sure, Boss; hold a stampede."

"Then step on the gas all the way. We'll wait for 'em on our own ground. If they get there first, it's going to be one heck of a race to the Gold Recorder's."

It was a stiff bit of ground over the mountain and down into the valley beyond. Endersley made it at the

run. He pulled his gun and ran and clawed and climbed by turns.

The fine falling snow had covered the land with its tiny particles, and a man's trail was good for three or four hours to a tracker. He followed his own trail back, his eyes ranging ahead seeking for signs of Magain. And halfway over, the marks of four other feet swung in to join his—but whereas his were coming away from Discovery Number One, the other four were going toward it. It was the sinister promise of tragedy, told in silent footprints.

Flinging caution to the wide winds, he scrambled down the scarred divide, slipping and sliding and picking his footgrips with a recklessness that would have given cold shudders to a mountaineer. Once a great lump of granite broke away from under his foot as he stepped on it and he used the tiny second of contact to step off it on to another. He went down that mountain-side as fast as hands and feet and a cold brain could carry him.

Far down in the valley he saw a picture that brought all the fighting blood in him racing to his head. At that moment all he wanted to do was to get Bully Magain's body in front of him and to punch and punch and punch it till he could punch no longer. He went Berserk mad; went drunk with the desire for fight.

Across the wide, white sweep of the ground he had pegged, long lines of footmarks lay drawn out obliquely from corner to corner. They embraced the whole area of the claim and there were trampled halts at the spots where he had driven his centre pegs.

He knew what had happened. In his rage he cursed Sitka Charley for having made him waste two hours in a

leisured feed-up while Magain and Coldwater Griff were getting ahead of them. As he got farther down he could see that they had also claimed a long stretch of plots to the right and left of the five he had pegged. And across the river another string of plots were pegged on the opposite bank. All the story was told in the criss-crossing footmarks.

"They're claiming proxy," he growled under his breath. "Claiming on the names of that crowd of Skagway skunks. That agent will hand them out a cash-down settlement for the whole lot, the hounds. Gosh, they'll be *giving* it away! There's a hundred fortunes inside those pegs, and they're slinging them away on—"

He choked. There was a red mist swinging about in his head, a mist that seemed to have the power to hurt and burn. He stared speechless at the story in the snow. Thoughts whizzed in and out of his brain in a tangled riot that refused to accept any form of coherence. He could have kicked himself in sheer temper at being beaten on the post by Magain after the dance he had led them and the chances he'd had.

The end of the story showed clear in the trail that led away from the claims to the edge of the racing river; it was Magain's trail pulling out for the South. Middle Forks never froze. It was always in tumultuous motion, even when the mercury went down to seventy below, which is over a hundred degrees of frost. Its bed was too steep, too full of sheer-away rapids, too broken up by tumbling falls flinging down in a helter-skelter of spray and foam, for even Jack Frost's mighty fingers to hold it.

He knew that if the bullies had a canoe cached somewhere down there they could get seventy miles start be-

fore the light failed—Middle Forks leaps down to the Chandalar at twenty miles an hour.

The trail left by Magain and Griff went on to the edge of the river and then struck away down beside it. Even if they had no canoe, Endersley knew he could not hope to overtake them with dogs. They would be travelling light, and he and Charley would have to make wide detours with the dogs. It would be slower going altogether.

He was exasperated and mad with himself, realizing as he did that Magain and Coldwater Griff must have laid up in the timber at Half-and-Half and followed him through until the unexpected thaw blotted out the trail.

He hurriedly cut new pegs and initialled them. By the time Sitka Charley had landed in with the team, he had redriven the whole set. Endersley waited for him at the edge of the river trail.

"Come on, old kid," he said, "let her rip. After 'em like the devil. If you say you know anything about mushing dogs, know it now!"

Charley leapt into the lead and clicked his tongue at Sunnygold.

"Ai ya! Sunny, my gal! Buck to it! Let her go! Mush! Chook! Ai ya! Figgerhead! Ai! Son o' Mike! Sunny! Show 'em yeh feet!"

Endersley gave a shove with the iron-shod gee pole and away went the team careering down by the river-bank, sheer into the falling snow, the sledge-runners singing a song of steel and sped on the rocky outcrops in the trail.

"A hundred miles of this, Charley, and we hit the Chandalar River," yelled Endersley, jamming his pole against a hummock.

"Chandalar—he froze! We wuz catch them pigdogs

when we wuz hit the Chandalar—you see!" answered the Sitka.

And deep down in his dour old heart he rumbled, "And, by Golly! I show you how to get dogs through on a hurry call! We catch them pigs—pah! 'Ow they stink!—we wuz catch 'em before they get through to the Yukon."

After that there was little said—little to say. Both of them pitched into the job in hand and wasted no breath on talking. There was a big, stiff job ahead of them and they knew it.

Little feathers of snow went flying away from the runner-heads, and the dogs, catching at the sudden, exciting spirit of a speed-run, were buckling down to it in long, heart-strong strides that chewed into the miles. Although Griff and Magain were running closely in each other's tracks to avoid giving any more assistance than they could help to the men astern, the mere fact that the trail had been trodden at all gave them at least five extra miles a day.

At every opportunity Charley raced the dogs; but there were many bad stretches, crossed and cut up by rock and broken country, where a slow crawl was the only progress possible. And Endersley knew that the men ahead were gaining. Their tracks were getting less and less distinct in the falling snow.

Middle Forks is a river that picks up an unconscionable number of feeds in its journey southwards. Once, during the first afternoon, they had to up-sledge and carry the whole outfit over seven little tributaries in less than a mile. During that first day's run no less than twenty-six different portage difficulties had to be surmounted. One of the dogs, Footsack, cracked a shoulder blade and

had to be shot and another got tangled up in its own auxiliary dragrope and fell down a crevice high up among the torn divides. It fell and strangled itself in its harness with the convulsive struggles it made to get free of the choking ropes. Before the light went out of the sky, another was out of the team, a passenger on the sledge with a foot crushed under a slipping boulder.

Magain and Griff were scarcely resting, scarcely stopping at all for sleep. When they did, they slept in the open snow. Their method was to throw up a snow hummock by the trailside and get down into the lee of it, coiling themselves up for an hour or two in wet blankets, which froze and kept the warmth in and the cold out. They built no fire and they boiled no tea. They couldn't stop for it; or for anything else. They were just human hurry-machines flying southward as fast as their legs could carry them, hammering the miles behind them on a last desperate effort to get through and turn the trick before Norvice got through to Circle City.

Magain and Griff were wanted men on both sides of the Boundary, and in pelting down into a hub of civilization again they were doing as bold a thing as ever they had done in all their reckless, lawless lives. It was their last big chance to make a fortune out of the Endersley strike and they were taking it while the offer held. They could not only sell their news and set up stampedes that would put out any chance the Cedar Falls boys had of getting in big on the new Bonanza, but with a modicum of luck they might even be able to record every claim they had pegged—and then get rid of them at throw-away prices before their real identities were discovered. There was every possibility that the Skagway agent might have

crossed over to Circle to await news there. If he was in the city, they knew he would pay cash down, and big cash, too, for every recorded claim he could lay his hands on.

It was a big stake and neither of them spared themselves in the landing of it. The only things they travelled with were a gun and a parcel of grub. They ate on the run. It was cold fare for them all the way. They ate light and slept light and they kept their snowshoes on—and moving all the time.

And behind them, toiling heatedly at bucking sledge and snarling dogs, Endersley and the Indian clung grimly in their wake while the gap between them widened hour by hour. The only ray of hope, so far as Endersley could see, was that the men ahead had not been able to get a canoe. All their progress was on foot. Had they suddenly struck in with a bunch of wandering Indians and been able to get a canoe from them, then Endersley knew he might just as well have chucked up the chase as a bad job—for the outlaws could have got through to Fort Yukon in less than four days.

By the end of the fourth day they got down out of the high ranges with their killing ridges and miles of high broken country and the going got a bit easier. The fall of the river was less rapid. The general country was flatter and not so broken up by tumultuous streams that required fording. But the Magains had gained miles in that breakneck rush through to the frozen Chandalar.

Single leg-lifters began to pass them flying northward with wild eyes and desperate speed. Some were travelling with a mere blanket and a bale of grub, some with only the bale of grub and some—the ones whose bones would

blaze the trail for the others yet to come—carried nothing at all—nothing save their own frenzied bodies and the shrieks of the Gold Voice ringing in their ears.

"The swine are selling the news already!" panted Endersley, hooking the sledge-runners free from a cluttering rubble of snow-covered boulders. "They'll have half the Yukon roaring up North unless we can get up with 'em!"

He raced ahead of the dogs. "Crowd it on, Charley! Let her rip! Another forty miles and we will be through to the river ice! Ai, Toothy! Ai, Figgerhead! Hit it up! Chook! Sunnygold, show 'em your pads!"

They swept southward to the song of ringing runner and cracking whip. On the sixth day they hit the Chandalar and swung in with a rush and a roar to the dead-true trail on the fast ice. The slow, terribly difficult country to the north was left behind. It was back-marked, with all its rocks and its boulders and its uprearing summits: its blizzards, its swift-running waters and its thundering avalanches. They were down again into travelling country, with its direct routes and its new-made trails, with its settlements and towns and dotted rest-houses. And the song of the runner went up a note as the steel bit into the ice, shrieking on the curves and droning on the grades.

The heart-breaking, shoulder-racking half of the journey was over—it was gone and profanely forgotten with every single one of its hard-wrested miles and bitter-wrought hours. The dogs were stretching out to the free sweeping miles of the close-packed trail on the flat level belly of the Chandalar. And Magain and Griff were still somewhere on ahead there, miles in the lead.

The injured dog was back again among the pullers, limping a bit on a bandaged foot, but pulling his weight with

the rest. Endersley and Charley took turn and turn about to rest up on the sledge. One belted along at the side of the dogs, keeping them at it with whip and voice, while the other stretched flat out along the sledge, pulled up the furs and renounced himself to exhausted sleep.

From the little settlements along the Chandalar they learned of the progress of Magain. They were getting ten-mile sprint lifts at the point of the gun from teams bound south for Circle. The pair were all of a day and a half ahead.

"Hittin' the miles like old tunket, they are!" they were told. "Rushin' down as if they was burning Time in the engines. Th'ain't even stoppin' for feed. They're buyin' it and eatin' it on the run. I'll tell the world, those two guys are crowin' it on so urgent you can't hardly see 'em pass. They're darn nigh leavin' a backwash! Tryin' to buy dogs, they are. But I guess the Chandalar knows Bully! You'd be surprised how many dogs there *ain't* on this River. Sure! Those boys are diggin' two long quick holes in the air. If you're aimin' to catch up with 'em you'll have to display the flat of your feet!"

As they swung round the Islands at the upper end of the Yukon Flats, they learned that their own roaring pace along the Chandalar was telling its own tale. The Magains were only six hours ahead!

Six hours ahead and a hundred miles to go! Out of the Chandalar and into the wide-flung Yukon they pelted, the dogs giving tongue and going all out. At Fort Yukon, Endersley changed three of his dogs that had cracked up under the strain and bought two others to replace the ones that had died back in the Endicott Ranges.

Fort Yukon gave them the news. "Who do you want?

A coupla toughs singeing the ice for Circle? Sure, kiddo, they were doin' all that—and then some! Red-eyed they was. Hurryin'! Heh! That's the one thing they wasn't doin' nothing else but! They been usin' their guns too: bullyin' lifts out of southbound teams. They passed through here just before dawn this mornin'. 'Bout five hours ahead of you. Held up Larry McClark on the end of a gun for a can of hot coffee. McClark was camped here in the trailside and couldn't raise a hoot. They swallowed his coffee and lit out agen as though half the yellin' devils of Tophet was screechin' down on their heels.''

''Which they mebbe wuz!'' yelped the Sitka, and whipped the dogs out into the trail at a full-chested, hell-for-leather spurt into the eye of the red-gold sun. They were leaving the white miles behind them, pouring them back under the runners in a humming, flying stream that was closing the gap down mile by mile. Reservation Black, Tinhorn, Specie were passed at a singing rush that set the whole river humming. Riverside camps poured themselves out on to the banks to gaze excitedly at a double dog-team streaking down river at a gait that looked as though the Yukon Championship was being run off six months ahead of its time. It was a long, careering, whirlwind rush that set up a line of excited talk all the way down from the Chandalar to Circle City.

Sometimes, on the flat level stretches, both men flung themselves on the sledge and took gasping, lung-laboured rest-ups while one of them, crouching on his knees, poured whip into the dogs.

Little camps went flashing by—Roundwood, Fairway, Lost Acre, Peppermint, and on past the Water Tanks, they swept past the smokes of Jefferson, Tinville, and

Methody. At midday they rested the dogs for an hour, and before the sun went down Pasquale, Pigs' Drift, MacPhee, and Salvation Point had been pegged back to the skyline.

The sun went down in a lake of crimson fire all ashimmer and aglow with the last lights of its own dying embers. There were great purple banners streaming out across the southwest, dark-topped with grey and underflushed with shining golden sheen. Above them the gloomy loom of huge cloud castle piled up into the zenith, fold on fold, battlemented and turreted and shot through and through with the piercing red lances of the sinking sun. It splashed itself on the mountain crests like glittering millions of fresh-cut diamonds, and flashed along the snow-loads on the trees in twinkling armies of sequin dots, red and sparkling alive with blazing fire.

And south and north the softer radiances of little blues and pinks and yellows hung like painted backdrop behind the sunset side of the world, glowing and merging and toning to the swift-falling dusk of the evening, and, shining like the reflected light of liquid glass on the high-hung slopes of the glaciers, the beacon lighthouses of the North were lit.

For an hour the splendour lingered, waning in brilliance minute by minute, but growing in beauty as the seconds sped; and then down came the night, black and impenetrable, with the moon still hull down beyond the loom of the mountains and the white stars aleap overhead as though they were all on strings and being jerked about by some cosmic joker up there in the pulseless night.

Shack fires and the lights of little townships lit up and glowed warmly yellow along the banks in the darkness, and

the sledge tore along with a grinding drone, into and out of the circles of light. On through the night they went, racing and running and riding, keeping the dogs at it minute by minute, gasping and panting and marvelling at the speed of the outlaws still holding on to their lead with the desperate strength of the hunted. They maintained the pace, fast and furious, searching the trail ahead for signs of Magain and Griff. And all down the length of the river they left strung out behind them a long and lengthening trail of speculation, wonderment, and argument. They made the Yukon sizzle.

At Burney's House they swept into the side of the trail and unharnessed the dogs. They were all in, footsore, weary, and paced almost to sleep.

Charley went round the whole team with the grease pot and massaged bacon fat into their paws as they fed. He fed them to repletion. The last four were sleeping as hard as dead hares by the time he got to them with the grease pot. And they *stayed* sleeping while he tended their paws with the bacon fat.

Out in the blackness of the mid-river they heard the grind and whinny of sledge-runners racing up river into the pall of the Northern night. Outfit after outfit swept by out of sight in the darkness, swinging past on the long clear stretches of the river trail. They passed to the riotous accompaniment of snapping, snuffling dogs, cracking whips, yelling runners, and vociferous men. Fierce oaths and fiercer rejoinders crackled out of the startled night as one team spurted and passed another, and the maddened passions of gold-mad men flew ace-high when their teams, scenting each other through the darkness, swept in upon each other and got themselves chaotically

tangled up in wild fighting mêlées that lost their owners hours of time and yards of temper. The speed-song of the runners was an undertone to the smack of the whips and the savage blasphemies of labouring leg-lifters.

Then the moon slid up over the white peaks to the southward and lit up the glittering hoar-frosted river. Upstream a half-dozen teams were still in sight, moving black dots against the dead white of the snowed-up river. Downstream, heading up from Circle City, a dozen more were beating up the miles as hard as they could go. Their cries and whipcracks echoed sharply back on the quivering air and the snapping and snarling of the dogs swelled from the south and diminished into the north for a solid hour before the last "Ai ya!" struck down from uptrail. When the last of the moving dots had vanished round the wide white bend, the river sank back into silence.

"That's the first stampede," said Endersley. "Cedar Falls boys going up! Good lads: they're dead on time. They're the first crowd up—ought to get in big for more than they will ever spend. But they'll be taking half the river towns with 'em if they keep to the main trail. Maybe they're aiming to cut cross country when they're out of the Yukon. Say, Charley, Nell must have got through without waiting."

Ahead lay the last lap, a twenty-mile run through to Circle City. Two hours Endersley gave the dogs and not a minute longer. Charley was sleeping like a Baldface in January, down and out on the flat of his back, dour face upturned to the stars and snoring like a grampus. Then up and at it again.

Charley was awake at a touch, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and trying to fold his stiff blankets at the same

time. But the blankets were intractable, frozen a bit too solid: "Huh! Plenty more blankets in Circle," he said with a guttural rumble, and kicked the blankets flying into the bush.

In seven minutes the team was under way again, yapping and snapping, heads to the south and pulling like tractors.

Dawn broke as they started, flooding up from the east in a soft outpouring of luminance as though a door had been slowly opened to the day. It showed up an empty, tenantless trail, white as the whiteness of the void and as silent. It was the wilderness, wild and primeval.

A cold fear was taking grip on Endersley's heart. He was giving way to the slow conviction that the last of the Magains must have either bought or stolen a dog-team from one of the riverside towns and taken the lead for good.

Charley refused to believe it. He was firmly of the opinion that they had already passed Magain and Griff—left them at a standstill somewhere back there in the night. But Endersley was not so optimistic.

They maintained the killing pace all through the white splendour of the morning. The air seemed to be hanging like suspended curtains of frosted gauze, all scintillant with diamond dust. They swept through Cleary, Buckland, and Lasker Ferry, and rushed along until the smoke haze of Circle City lifted ahead, five miles farther on round the bend of the river.

And it was then that the thing happened. Abruptly and without a shadow of warning, a rifle shot cracked out of the timber on the near side bank. The shock of it seemed to split the air and the wheel-dog somersaulted

in its harness and hung in the drags. The others turned to savage him. Another shot and then another rang out and two more dogs were switching in the packed snow of the trail.

Endersley grabbed his gun and raced across the snow heading for the spot on the bank whence the bullets had come, while Charley struggled to get some sort of order out of the chaos the dogs were in. The whole crowd of them were fighting like mad things at the smell of live blood. Three more of them pitched over in the snow, one of them dying with another's leg still fast in its jaws.

The Sitka swore below his breath and ran in a jerky zig-zag toward the bank, unslinging his rifle as he went. Endersley had already disappeared in the wooded rise of the bank and Charley headed in after him.

No sooner had he disappeared than Coldwater Griff slid out from behind a great ice hummock at the side of the trail and ran to the dogs. He cut two of them adrift, Sunnygold and Figgerhead, with great slashing strokes of a bowie, and dragged them by the scruffs of their necks back to the ice hummock.

Magain, crouching low and running at top speed, came down from the bank and joined him. Behind the high hummock their own team was tethered, four mangy-looking Malamutes, stolen or traded from some one along the route. Sunnygold and Figgerhead were harnessed at the head of them and with savage kicks and blows from the butt of the whip, the team pulled out.

"Chook, you yaller devils!" hissed Griff and piled the whipstock savagely.

The runners protested loudly on the frozen snow as the sledge swept out and away downtrail.

Endersley and the Indian burst out of the timber just in time to see the team swing round the bend of the river.

For a moment Endersley could scarcely believe his eyes. The whole thing, from start to finish, had happened in such a bewilderingly short time that he could hardly realize that Griff and Magain were away downtrail on the last five miles, leaving him stranded like a blown cinder on the trailside.

Then with a half-strangled snarl, rabid and throaty as one of his own dogs, he started forward.

"Run, Charley! Run!" he yelled. "Run like blazes! We may be able to get a shot at 'em round the bend!"

They leapt forward and rushed up the trail. But Magain had raced those dogs as they had never been raced before. They could hear his whip pouring into them ceaselessly, hear their agonized yelpings as they took its biting lash on their flanks and palpitating ribs. They pulled and raced on their last despairing ounce, madly, desperately, in a flying endeavour to escape the ferocious attentions of the goading whip.

Endersley and the Indian raced side by side up the trail in the wake of the fast-vanishing dogs, but in less than ten minutes Magain was more than half a mile ahead, crouching low on the flying sledge, pouring in whip like water from a hose. They were far out of sight, but still the loud crack of the whip and the frenzied, helpless howlings of the dogs came back to them as Magain cut the very fur off their hides to get a few extra yards out of them.

He could hear Sunnygold's exasperated remonstrances above them all. She was a dog who never required much whip. The mere sound of it was enough to send her ramming her chest with all her eager strength into the brac-

ing of the harness. And Sunnygold was not used to such inexplicable treatment as she was getting from Magain's lash. What she had to give she gave freely without any urgings from pickled moosehide thongs. But Magain had recognized in Sunnygold a dog of peerless pulling and power and he piled his whip into her quivering flesh without mercy.

"Hell!" said Endersley, and raced ahead with the blood drumming hot and angry in his temples.

## CHAPTER XIV

On the outskirts of Circle City June Royal stood and waited for her lover. She had taken up a position on the high bank above the trail, a position that gave her a clear view up river for a good mile. For two days she had waited there, in the sheltering lee of a copse of alders, waiting for the first sight of Bob to come swinging round the bend of the river at the side of his racing dogs.

As the team shot into view, she waved her handkerchief madly and danced about excitedly in the snow.

To her it was the last lap of a very long journey both for herself and her young lover; the end of all trouble and effort, the end of all worry and danger. To her, the successful termination of his last trip meant love and happiness and the realization of all the thousand delightful little plans they had talked about back there in the quiet woods around Cedar Falls.

"Run, Bobby! Run!" she cried. "They're all waiting for you in the Gold Recorder's!" She cupped her hands and shouted it again and again, flinging her message downwind at the top of her clear jubilant treble.

But there came no answering hail from the men with the sledge, no cheery halloo or rollicking greeting.

She saw them piling the whip into the dogs as though their very lives depended on it, as though more than life itself were hanging in the balance of speed they were forcing from their torn limbs. Both men were riding on the

sledge, too, both of them, while the dogs were straining their hearts out against the bucking drags.

Her brow puckered in perplexity. Bob never used a whip with such mercilessness as that. And certainly it was not Bob's way to flog his dogs and ride the runners too. And it was odd for them both to be on the sledge at once.

Something must have gone wrong, radically wrong. The thought raced to her head. An accident somewhere—a bad accident, by the look of things. There were only half the dogs left. Something must have happened back there along the trail. Charley was not the one to lose half his team, even on an urgent speed run. He could get speed out of his dogs and yet nurse his dogs at the same time better than any man above the Yukon line. An avalanche—a snowslide—frostbite—disease—every possible contingency flew through her brain as she stood among those alders above the trail. For a moment she thought it must be some other party got in ahead of her man.

But there was Sunnygold in the lead. She recognized her in an instant; recognized her by the eager thrusting pull of her stride and her tawny gold coat.

Then she gasped. There was blood all over Sunnygold! The dog was whimpering with the stinging pain of the lash as she raced along. She was in pitiful distress, almost moaning at the treatment she neither deserved nor understood. She had given of her valiant best all through that long killing run down from the Endicotts, done her damnedest, often with raw pads and a bursting heart.

June stared in horror as the sledge careered toward her. She gazed at it in open wonderment, trying to fathom the mystery presented by that rocking sledge. Then, under the close-tied parkas, she saw the faces of the men on the

sledge. Not Bobby Endersley and the Sitka Indian, but Bully Magain and Coldwater Griff.

In a flash the truth burst upon her. She saw the sinister dreadfulness of those two inhuman brutes on the sledge, their sullen eyes ranging grimly ahead, lashing at the dogs in cold-blooded frenzy.

Then at the top bend of the river she saw two more figures, black figures that ran and stumbled and ran again as though paced to utter exhaustion.

The sledge was almost up to her. For one horrific second she looked at Magain; then, raising her voice, she bent forward and cried: "Sunnygold! Sunnygold! Oh, you poor, poor thing! Sunnygold! Out of the trail, doggy! Jump to me!"

Sunnygold's ears flicked at the first syllable of that remembered voice. Before three more had sounded, she had obeyed. Here was a little mistress who understood her, some one who belonged to her, some one who certainly would never flog her like these people were doing.

Sunnygold, flinging aside all her tribal laws, flouting even her own proud racial creed—that the team leader shall keep the sledge true in the trail though the heavens fall—leapt up and out of the sunken trail with a whine of joy, up and out to the voice she knew.

It is doubtful if Griff and Magain ever quite knew just what it was that happened to them at the Milepost outside Circle City. All they knew was they were the unwilling recipients of the full effects, the results—which were uncomprehendable and uncomfortable from every point of view.

What happened was that, when Sunnygold leapt up and out of the trail, the other dogs were unable to keep their

line. They came to a sudden, tangled-up standstill and the rushing sledge overran the wheel dog. It rose, canted, shot up the bank like a great stranded shark and turned completely over, pitching the two ruffians headlong into the soft snow outside the trail. The sledge toppled upon them and knocked every bit of wind out of them. It was a *débâcle* as ludicrous as it was simple, as undignified as it was complete.

They went down headfirst in a sprawling riot of arms and legs. The shock of their impetus forced them deep into the snow-crust, their great booted feet kicking about absurdly in the air. Half-strangled oaths and howling blasphemies belched out of the snow as the two bullies struggled Homerically to free themselves.

June ran swiftly down the bank and got behind them. One after the other she took possession of their firearms, lifting them neatly from their holsters and pitching them up among the alders above the trail.

With the snick of a knife she cut Sunnygold free and waited for the bullies to get their faces out of the snow. Magain was first to rescue himself from his ignominious position, and as soon as his bewildered eyes saw the laughing face of the girl, his hand went down with a rabid curse for his gun.

"Nothing doing, Bully," she smiled. "I'm afraid I had to steal your guns—I had to do that once before, if you remember, right back in Cedar Falls ever so long ago. And I'm sure you recollect that I can shoot fairly straight myself. Watch!"

There was an old, half-rusted coffee can tied on the backboard of their sledge. June pulled her own gun and

let fly from the hip. There was a crack and a ping!—and that coffee can would hold no more coffee.

Coldwater Griff heaved himself into a less inglorious attitude and the two of them sat and glared at the girl while she waited for Endersley to catch up.

Endersley caught up. And he sat down with a wallop in the snow. He was dead-beat and played out. Ten days' blind fly down the Southbound, hammering at the mileage hour after hour on a minimum of sleep, had run to a culmination in a four-mile sprint over ice in a kit that was over a stone in weight. He just flopped down, panted, and glared at his man.

"I want you, Bully!" he gasped.

"Yes?"

"Yes. Just as you are. You owe me some!"

"My sweet lamp, Bully only pays one way! You hadn't better want me any more than you can help!"

"Soon's I've got my breath back, you bulldozing swamp-rat, we're going to bash each other. Get that?—Bash each other."

Magain snarled at him. "You'd best keep on gettin' your breath back, my lad. Keep on gettin' it back—for days and days and days! You'll be safer sittin' down than standin' up!"

"You—you've had a good run, Bully. Just keep your face quiet for a minute or two and we'll arbitrate all debts my way."

Magain stolidly unfastened the thongs of his snow-shoes and flung them over his head toward the sledge. He stamped about to get the circulation back to the extremities of his feet, and assured Griff that, in the event of

accident, he'd like a lot of flowers. When he was ready, Endersley took off his fur mittens.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Don't make me nervous, sir," jeered Magain, scowling at him. "If that little bitch there hadn't collared my gun I'd—"

Endersley stood up. "Come on, you swine!" he said.

And Magain came on. In a rip-roaring, arm-swinging hurricane of flesh and bone Magain came on. And Magain went back; he went back to the impetus of a bone-hard fist that landed full on his teeth. It smashed his lips and sent his head rocketing back as though it were on a swivel. And before he could get his balance, Endersley was on him, crashing in a volley of lefts and rights that clicked on his jaws with a horrible bony sound in the silence of the morning.

Magain tucked his head down, covered up, and charged forward, rumbling in his throat like a maddened bull. He looked mountainous and enormous, imbued with all the crush-weight strength of a bear. Endersley gave ground as he came and shot in an uppercut that took him clean underneath the chin and sent him spinning down into the snow.

Magain rolled up to his knees and stared at him.

"Jest a minute, my bantam cock, while I get peeled," he growled. "I'll have pleasure in knockin' the breakfast out of you, minus me coat."

The two of them stripped themselves of their parkas and furs and, clad in only breeches and woollen warms, stood to each other and fought. Out on the frozen river, within sight of the Gold Recorder's with the entire stock population of Circle City rushing up the trail to witness it,

they fought. They battered it out man to man in the hard-trampled snow of the trail-side, with the girl up under the alders covering them with a gun.

And when the Circle City crowd got up to them, they found not two, but *four* men fighting like demented cats out there in the white silence. Sitka Charley was settling a little account of his own, demonstrating for all time to Coldwater Griff that, though the white man is privileged to insult the Sitka in a thousand diverse ways, it is the completest height of unwisdom to call him "Siwash"!

There was the crack and smack of blows thudding home and the labouring pant of lungs pumping to bursting point, clinches and wrestles and hard open fighting, man swaying back from man in a frenzy of bottled-up wrath and blazing confidence.

A roar went up from the crowd when they saw Magain using his elbows and they howled again when he sent Endersley sprawling on his back with a swing butt from his bullet head.

"Hey, you! Big 'un!" a ferocious little copper miner of about five foot nothing yelled at him. "You fight fair, y' ugly lump—or there'll be a bunch of us takin' sides, and it won't be yours!"

But Endersley was up after a minute's rest and he whaled in with cold fury at the bully.

"You pulled my pegs, you swipe!" he gritted and slammed in a right-hander that closed Magain's left eye. The breath was hanging around them in great gouts of slow-rising steam and they were sweating wet. Twice Magain got home with terrific body blows that shook Endersley to the hair and three times he countered with the right just a little too high on Endersley's jaw. He rushed

in to settle the matter, but Endersley sent his head cracking back as though it had been hit by a kicking moose.

"Only pay one way, do you?" growled Endersley, and played on the puffed eye. "Well, hand me the change out of *this!*" He whanged in with a right-handed hit that flattened Magain's nose and toppled him over backwards.

Magain was up and in again with a rush and a bleeding nose. And Endersley played on the puffed eye till Magain went nearly mad. He jabbed and hooked and swung at it, pounding in hits from any and every angle, breaking through every guard Magain put up. He got the bully into such a state of exasperated helplessness that Magain, letting out a bellow of fury, suddenly ducked his head and rushed at him with every semblance of guard gone. He was just a human fighting machine gone recklessly mad, berserk, a great bull of a man rushing in to overwhelm a lesser tormentor by sheer weight of brute force.

Endersley half-tripped in the caking snow and Magain saw his chance. He swung a right-handed punch at him with every ounce of his great body power behind it. June Royal gasped. Endersley was completely open and off his balance.

But the blow never landed. At least, not on Endersley. It took Coldwater Griff on the jaw with a shock that sent him spinning and staggering drunkenly before he pitched over with a crash in the snow, down and out, as flat as a flapjack. Charley, with a hard sogging left, had quite unconsciously poked Griff's head sheer into the line of Magain's sledge-hammer.

Endersley got his balance again and gave ground before Magain's Herculean attack. They clinched and

swayed round for a spell, getting their breath back, and, breaking out of that clinch, Endersley saw as fine an opening as he had ever had—a half-dropped guard and the weight of the body mostly on the wrong foot. He stepped in with a jump and slogged in a beautifully timed right-hander full and flush on the point of the bully's jaw. Magain dropped where he stood, like a sack of beans, as insensible to his defeat as to the rollicking catcalls of Circle City.

Endersley sat down on the overturned sledge and wiped his forehead.

"Sir," said a voice just above him, "I'm pleased to meet you. My name is Livesey: Joshua Abinadab Phineas Livesey. That ain't my fault. I'm Sheriff here. That *is* my fault. It cost me four fights like yours just now to get the job. It cost me one a fortnight to hold it down. I repeat, I'm pleased to meet you. That was one real bred-in-the-bone he-fight. I liked it. I'm Sheriff. How-do?"

"A bit sore, Sheriff. And I'm pleased to meet you, too. If—"

"I'm also Gold Recorder here." (He was also a tiny bit high-falutin, but he didn't say so.) "I'm told you need to see me—you having just been 'way up in the Endicotts unearthin' ten-mile slabs of gold. I'll take pleasure in—I'm sorry, Miss!"

He broke off his good-natured speech to step aside. June was on her knees in front of her man with snow-water and a dab of liniment.

"I'll see you in the office, sir," he concluded from a distance. "You've skinned out half Circle City. They've

gone whoopin' up the Yukon, cuttin' claim pegs as they went. Meanwhile, sir, the carriage waits."

June, with a hint of tears in her eyes, busied herself with her first-aid work till Endersley, with a laugh and a kiss, stood up and took her by the arm toward the Sheriff.

Their entry into Circle City was a triumphal procession. They rode in on the Sheriff's sledge, behind the Sheriff's team—and with Sunnygold pulling hard in the lead. They rode right in through the main street and bang up to the offices of the Gold Commissioner. And there they were met by their own crowd.

"Why, bless my soul!" cried Bob delightedly; "look who's here! Pierre! Well, this *is* great! Say, Padre, I am pleased to see you again."

The old Baptist smiled a beatific smile and almost looked self-conscious.

"Why, hello, Bob! How are yeh, Bob?" called a voice. "Everything turn out all right up over? Have a good run down on the ice? How'd the dogs keep? That was a mangy lot you tailed off with. Have any rain? We had a bit of a 'kink' flaw here. Nigh washed us out. Darn, helluppin', cracker-jack saints, you oughter seen it! Ain't the gal lookin' fine? Gee, she's a dandy! Brought her over slow and careful. Travelled her on the sledge all the way. Her ankle's nigh abouts to rights now. Dadrot me if some people don't get all the luck. Heard any about that Magain crush? Norvice landed in yesterday night like an aggravated jolt of lightnin'. He's streakin' around lookin' for 'em through the backsight of a gun!" Nanayak came bustling up, making his coming known in his own inimitable style from a hundred yards away.

"Hello, Nan!" called Bob. "Yes, sure. Had a fine run.

Bully held me to a race for it right down to the Milepost. It was good of you to look after June. She's looking fine! But everything's in such a roaring rush-about I've hardly had time to see her yet. Come here a minute, Nan, old kid, I want to whisper."

He pushed a claim paper into Nanayak's hand.

"Quick! Go and file that!" he said. "Sitka Charley takes two thirds of it. You supply him a working hand on wages and take the other third. You clear half a million. That all right?"

Nanayak winked. "Gosh! If some folk don't seem to get their section of luck, too!" he burbled and went in to reel off a sheaf of highly technical lies to the Gold Recorder, a notable portion of whose facial equipment was two huge wads of cotton wool stuffed in his ears. Sheriffs constitute themselves their own Court of Equity above the zero-line and Sheriff Joshua Abinadab Phineas Livesey had a nose of his own for smelling out the rights and wrongs of the administration of justice. "Justice, sir," he was apt to declare, "would be as blind in the North as it is in the South if it wasn't for her perfoundly common-sensical line of Sheriffs." By which he most likely meant that the Law can be broken without breaking it.

And then there was Nell and Jim Devereaux and Josh Henderson and Cod Keppel, and all the whole crowd of them chi-iking each other and shaking hands all round as pleased as a crowd of schoolboys home for the holidays.

"Bat Masterson's gone up for us," they explained. "The hull bunch of us got together and drew lots for it. Bat lost. He chose his team, from every husky in Cedar Falls. Dawgs! You never saw sich a line of dawgs as he's mushin'. He's got a heluva setout! He'll beat the

band. The Klondike to a split snowflake he'll beat the band. Josh Henderson gave him six hours' start. He went rampagin' up the Northbound like as if he was impatient to get somewhere! We're all waiting for him here. Say, Bob, when's the weddin'?"

"Just as soon as you old toughs can leave off making a fuss of my girl. Where's Pierre? Hey, Padre, a word in your ear."

He dragged himself away from the crowd and went over to the minister.

"Pierre," he said with a happy grin, "did you bring along that little matter I—er—I asked Nell if—"

The Baptist's face broke out into a wreath of wrinkles.

"My son, I would rather have stayed away altogether than have forgotten so delightful a trust," he said. "I would like to have married you two young children in Cedar Falls, in the little township where you first met, where little June slaved to pull you back to life when your spirit was almost fled." He sighed. "Ah! but young folk are too impatient these days," he said with a whimsical smile. "Yes, Nell brought me your message. I have brought along the Book, my son: I never travel without it. And"—he broke out again into a delightful smile—"and I have brought along something else, too. Something you will need when the time comes."

Endersley laughed back at the Baptist. "Something made from one of my own nuggets, Padre?" he whispered, and Pierre Bonard nodded. Endersley had given him a little nugget from his own first diggings to have made into a wedding ring for him at the jewel stores up in Dawson.

The young gold-hunter took the ring and then looked soberly at the old minister.

"Padre, what are you going to do now that all your flock has deserted you?" he asked quietly.

Bonard shrugged. "What can I do? I must go up with them. The flock has never yet come to the Church, my son: the Church must always go to the flock. It is militant. If the flock moves, the Church must move. I am the Church. Therefore, I shall go up with the flock. In a week or two the Endersley strike will no longer be a rumour. It will be a definite centre on the map: a city that will stand badly in need of a minister of God. And what do you think the boys have decided to call that city?"

"Haven't the faintest idea, Papa!"

"Royal! Just plain Royal! Isn't that a grand name for a new gold city, my son?"

"Grand! Do you hear that, June, lassie? As soon as you lose that sweet name of yours to me, you will find it again up there in the Endicotts. And listen, dearest. Pierre says he's going to follow his crowd of bad eggs right up to where they're going. What can we do about that?"

"Well!" said Bonard lugubriously, "all my children have run away from me. Cedar Falls is empty. I cannot minister to an empty city. They have migrated northward and I must follow them."

"Yes, but what can we do about it, June?"

June drew the splendid old minister on one side. "Pierre, you old darling," she whispered. "Bob has brought you back a present. You'll hurt us very much if you don't accept it, really. Up there at the end of the trail you will have to build yourself a new mission, a new home, and you'll have all sorts of very big expenses to meet. You'll need an awful lot of money if you are to

get the Church established right up there." She slipped the claim paper into his hand. "You can do ever so much good with that up there, can't you?" she said encouragingly. "There will be an awful lot of hard-luck men landing in up there on the dead end of the stampede and—and I think you'll—need something like this." She put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

Bonard gazed down at his hands, staring like a man bereft, at the claim rights of Discovery Number 2.

And then Norvice came in. Straight and direct down the trail he came, tense, resolute, and grim. And ahead of him, shuffling sullenly at the behest of his great gleaming Colt, marched Coldwater Griff and Bully Magain.

Circle City cheered raucously and made way for the small procession. He marched them right up the main street, up to the door of the Sheriff's office, and pushed them through.

Joshua Abinadab Phineas Livesey looked up without a spark of surprise as the trio clattered in.

He rose.

"Mr. Norvice, sir," he announced with dignity, "I'm pleased to meet you. I heard you were coming. And I've also heard from citizens of Cedar Falls passing through certain other facts in connection with you and Magain. I'm proud to know you have succeeded in your pledge. I once had to do something like that in order to get this job as Sheriff and I have to do it about once a fortnit in order to hold my job down. I've got the handcuffs *and* legirons all handy. How-do?"

Norvice saluted the Sheriff and handed his charges over.

"There is a reward out for these two portions of junk,"

observed the Sheriff. "I notice you are no longer in the uniform of that much-respected force, the Canadian Mounted Police. Therefore, you are entitled to said reward; it is nearabouts in the proximity of ten thousand dollars. I will make application for same on your behalf immediately." Then turning his head, he roared out "Bill!"

Bill appeared; a great hefty giant of a man with a cast in his eye.

"See to them two hoodlums!" said the Sheriff.

And Bill saw to them. He handcuffed and legironed them and hiked them away to the city jail, which was a stout-built outhouse behind the Sheriff's office.

Norvice saw the pair of them tight under lock and key and then he went back to the Sheriff.

"Say, Sheriff," he said, "that was darn good of you to call your dogs off when you heard I was out chasing those two stiffs."

"Well?" said the Sheriff, without glancing up from a file of mining licences.

"Your men could have nabbed them as easy as I did."

"Mr. Norvice, sir, in vocalizing that information you are carrying gilded lilies to Newcastle."

"Well, *I* never corralled those two stiffs."

"You sure didn't, boy."

"You collared 'em yourself."

"I sure did, boy. And as such I will make out application for said reward on my own behalf. I'm pleased to meet a knowledgeable man. Mr. Norvice, sir, I'm pleased to meet you. I will either hold these prisoners on American warrants till extradition orders come through, or send

them down to headquarters to be summarily dealt with on this side, according to orders. In any case, they are booked for the black cap. There is murder on both their sheets."

Norvice went out and ran full tilt into Endersley and June, having a quiet little tête-à-tête outside.

"Hello, Ralph, old man, done the job at last?" said Bob, shaking hands warmly.

"I'll tell the world so, Mr. Endersley."

"And is it—back to the Scarlet and Blue now?"

Norvice looked at him quizzically and put his arm round Nell's waist. "Just as soon as you've finished your little bit of business with Circle City Church," he informed him, "I should like a short loan of it."

"What? Why not fix it up together?"

"May we?"

"Sure we shall. It's one of those things that mustn't be otherwise."

"That'll be fine!"

"But, say, I want a wedding present, Ralph?"

"Anything I've got—except a job! I haven't got one of those."

"That Government parchment. June and I want to frame it in a frame of our own gold. Just for old sake's sake, Ralph. Not asking too much, am I?"

"Take it, old scout." He fished it out of his breast pocket and handed it over to Endersley, the parchment with the bullet holes clean through the eyes of Griff and Magain.

Endersley caught him by the wrist and put his mouth right up against Norvice's ear.

"What's coming to those two blighters?" he whispered.

"Death! Sure as night," said Norvice with cold assurance.

And Endersley nodded, glad and relieved in his inmost soul that June would never find that lost brother of hers.

He held out a slip of paper to Ralph Norvice.

"Here Sergeant. Here's a present from us," he said.

"My stars!" gasped Norvice, and, as a Mounted Man would, jumped into the Gold Recorder's at a bound, lest the precious writing on it vanish on the way.

Endersley and June, laughing gaily and arm in arm, followed him in.

The Recorder opened the register wide and laid it out before them.

"This is one great day," he said, swelling with pride.

"Bigger than that," answered Bob, and the hand that was round June's shoulder caressed the soft skin of her cheek.

Endersley and June signed the register and then signed again on the identification and licence ledgers. The Recorder filed their claims, and stamped and handed them their mining licences.

"And that," said Endersley, putting down the pen, "is the end of a man-sized run."

Ralph went out. Nell went out.

The Commissioner, Recorder, Registrar, and Sheriff rose, bowed, and retired. He, Mr. Joshua Abinadab Phineas Livesey, a knowledgeable man, went out, too.

"June," said Endersley, all quiet at last, "come here, my dearest."

Outside they heard an unmistakable voice that came bustling up from nowhere.

"Out of it! All you lick-skittlin' sons of hobos, clear

away out of it!" he yowled. "Git miles away from that there door! Indelikit lot of varmints! Come on, all the hull blame crowd of yeh!—over and tiddivate up the Church. Them two's been waitin' for this day all their lives."

THE END

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The FROZEN TRAIL
By AUSTIN J. SMALL
J. Farrington Elwell